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British military policy in Egypt and Palestine : August 1914 - June 1917.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is concerned with a fresh examination of British military policy in Egypt and Palestine from August 1914 to June 1917. By the judicious use of private papers and contemporary official documents it has been possible to outline the strategic decisions taken in London and their effect upon the generals and their troops in Egypt throughout this period. A re-assessment of the careers of Generals Maxwell and Murray while in Egypt has also been made. The entire work falls into two parts: from August 1914 up to the end of December 1915 the concern is with the period in Egypt while General Maxwell was in sole command; from January 1916 until June 1917 General Murray's command in the country becomes the centre of interest.

It is revealed that when General Maxwell took over in Egypt in 1914 the country was in a state of military chaos, and when the Turks attacked the Suez Canal in February 1915 many of the Indian troops were proved to be unreliable. Nonetheless, thoughts of striking offensively at the enemy in Syria were entertained repeatedly throughout 1914 and 1915 and at many different locations other than the most popular choice, Alexandretta. These offensive suggestions were strengthened by British interest in Arab co-operation in Syria in 1915 which was believed to be potentially most valuable. Finally, concern for Egyptian security at the end of 1915 helped to undermine Maxwell's position because so little had been done to the country's defences east of the Suez Canal.

General Murray's arrival in Egypt in January 1916 has been shown to be dramatic; he successfully cleared up and re-organized a most confusing situation and did all that had been asked of him. His operations to the east of Egypt in the Sinai until January 1917, moreover, were conducted with some skill and energy both by himself and his subordinates. His very success, however, meant that still more was expected of him in London even though he was so short of troops, and this led to two defeats at Gaza. Even after these he continued to command intelligently and most of the foundations for the future success of General Allenby were laid in Palestine in these months. Although Murray has often been portrayed as a hindrance to the Arab revolt, he did, in fact, support it to the best of his ability and was, at times, most enthusiastic about co-operation between his troops and Arab irregulars.

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PREFACE

My thanks are due to Professor Brian Nohd, who suggested the subject of this thesis and encouraged me when further work seemed impossible because of a shortage of funding. I should like also to thank Professor Freedman and the Department of War Studies for obtaining financial support for me in my third year and being most understanding when difficulties arose connected with my imminent departure for Africa. All the librarians at the various libraries and archives I have visited were most helpful. The support of Graham and Barbara Baldwin and particularly that of my parents and sister has been greatly appreciated; it enabled me to keep going in spite of adverse circumstances.

I should like to dedicate this thesis to King's College Christian Union, whose members provided me with Christian fellowship and friendship for four years.

ABBREVIATIONS

1. Military

BGGS	Brigadier-General, General Staff
CGS	Chief of the General Staff
CID	Committee of Imperial Defence
CIGS	Chief of the Imperial General Staff
EEF	Egyptian Expeditionary Force
GHQ	General Headquarters
GOC	General Officer Commanding
GOC in C	General Officer Commanding in Chief
HQ	Headquarters
MEF	Mediterranean Expeditionary Force

In footnotes ranks are given according to their common abbreviations (Lt. for Lieutenant, Col. for Colonel, etc.).

2. Frequently cited published works

Official History	G. MacMunn & C. Falls, <u>Military operations Egypt & Palestine from the outbreak of war with Germany to June 1917</u> (London, 1928)
Official History II	C. Falls, <u>Military operations Egypt & Palestine, June 1917 to the end of the war</u> . 2 vols. (London, 1930)
Australian Official History	H. S. Gullett, <u>The Australian Imperial Force in Sinai and Palestine</u> (Sydney, 1923)

A NOTE ON THE USE OF WAR DIARIES

The War Diaries of the British forces in Egypt during the period under consideration which are held in the Public Record Office are numerous but not always consistent. I have therefore adopted the following manner of referring to them.

The first time a War Diary is mentioned in a footnote it is given its full title, e.g. W.D. 11th Indian Division 31 Jan. 1915 W.O. 95/4422. The date is that of the entry in the War Diary itself. Should the same War Diary be used again in the text, only the date of the entry and the Public Record Office reference would be supplied.

If they are particularly important (a GHQ Diary, for example) War Diaries often contain extensive appendices, which are usually full of additional documents and plans. In such cases I have cited only the document itself and the W.O. 95 reference instead of the entire War Diary notation, since the document concerned could be found elsewhere also, e.g. Captured Turkish Army Order No. 21. 21 Feb. 1915 W.O. 95/4417.

This procedure has seemed to me the most logical method of using what is both a very rich and a most confusing source of additional information, since there are no fixed rules of reference.

Some Intelligence War Diaries also appear in the Public Record Office class W.O. 157 and in the India Office class L/MIL and the same course of action has been followed with them.

INTRODUCTION

'It would require a very good writer to
write the History of the Histories of the War.'

General Murray at Aldershot 26 February 1932

The initial assumption underlying this study has been that a serious and systematic examination of British military policy in Egypt and Palestine from the start of the Great War until the arrival of General Allenby in June 1917 has not been attempted since the official records became available at the Public Record Office. My intention has been to show that this omission from the historiography of the First World War is a sad one because there is much that is both interesting and, indeed, revealing to be found in a careful scrutiny of the material.

In one sense it is a subject in itself to explain why this fairly large topic has been neglected, but we need to make at least a brief consideration of the reasons because by doing so we shall gain a good general understanding of the traditional approach of many historians to our topic.

Without doubt the campaigns fought by Allenby in 1917 and 1918 have tended to cast a shadow over all that went before them. Allenby was remarkably successful. This success has perhaps caused some writers to exaggerate the standard of these campaigns from the British side so that Liddell Hart described the Megiddo offensive of 1918 as 'one of the most quickly decisive campaigns and the most completely decisive battles in all history.'¹ Allenby's sweeping victories have attracted a certain amount of attention from military

1 B. Liddell Hart, History of the First World War (London, 1973), p.553.

writers seeking to ascertain what caused these successes.² On the other hand, such studies tend to distort any understanding of the command in Egypt before June 1917 simply because it is often used only as a contrast with the victories under Allenby. After all, since both Generals Maxwell and Murray can quite legitimately be criticised for certain of their decisions the assumption has usually been, therefore, that Allenby acted correctly where they did not and, consequently, he succeeded while they failed. It does not seem so surprising, as a result, that Murray's advance across the Sinai or Maxwell's repulse of the Turks at the Canal do not appear nearly so interesting or worthy of examination as do, say, the occupation of Jerusalem or the deception of the Turks at Beersheba. This very fact has even been admitted by one of Allenby's biographers, Wavell, who explained that military history tends to look more to spectacular events than to apparently mundane tasks such as the reorganisation of armies, a task that took up a great deal of General Murray's time in Egypt, for example.³

If the successes of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force after June 1917 have made the campaign before them seem a little mundane they have also emphasized the generalship of Allenby. Wavell, who knew the man during the war, never seems able to escape from a degree of reverence for him in his biography that sounds somewhat unfortunate

2 The most obvious example of this is A. P. Wavell, The Palestine campaigns (London, 1928), but see also A. Kearsley, The operations in Egypt and Palestine, illustrating the Field Service Regulations (London, 1929).

3 A. P. Wavell, Allenby: a study in greatness (London, 1940), p.261.

to the modern reader:

Israelite, Assyrian, Greek, Roman, Jew, Arab, Crusader, Turk had entered Jerusalem as conquerors before the British. None of these nations can have been represented by one more impressive or worthier⁴ of his race than was Allenby, physically or morally.

Wavell was not the only one who regarded Edmund Allenby so highly, for T. E. Lawrence described him as 'the image we worshipped.'⁵ With praise as strong as this Allenby's predecessors have rather faded into the background in comparison and they have not received sufficient attention.

The personality and career of T. E. Lawrence himself have had a profound impact on the historiography of the Palestine campaigns. For one thing, the emphasis of his still most popular Seven Pillars of Wisdom is placed upon the Arab Revolt, while the operations of the EEF seem to take place almost as an adjunct to those of the Arabs. Moreover, since the Arabs did not capture Aqaba and establish direct contact with the EEF until July 1917 Lawrence's perspective on the operations before this date tends to be somewhat sketchy, to say the least. The extent of Lawrence's influence in the later 1920s can be gauged by a letter to General Murray from a Colonel Watkins in America:

I consider it unfair to you, sir, as well as to the men who served under you... to have the facts buried... This country was publishing such outrageous stories of the Palestine campaign, and making an effort to steal the glory... and confer it on Lawrence, that I made up my mind to give the American people the facts. ... This country is 'Lawrence mad.'⁶

⁴ Ibid., p.230.

⁵ T. E. Lawrence, Seven pillars of wisdom (London, 1935), p.383.

⁶ Col. E. A. Watkins to Murray 25 Jan. 1929. Murray papers 79/48/4.

Nor was Lloyd George immune from this intense popular enthusiasm for the man and his writings, for he outlined in the preface to his War Memoirs that he had 'sought out for laudation' certain military leaders, including Allenby and Lawrence.⁷

The Arab Revolt itself has also been responsible for a certain amount of distortion. Because of later developments in the Middle East and the apparent agreements made by the British with both the Jews and the Arabs, as well as secret negotiations with the French, most attention given to this subject has centred upon the politics of the movement when, in fact, from the British perspective at least, it was largely a military matter. Sir Henry McMahon, the High Commissioner in Egypt and the very man who negotiated with Sherif Hussein, admitted this in September 1916: 'It was the most unfortunate date in my life when I was left in charge of this Arab movement... it is nothing to do with me: it is purely a military business.'⁸

British military policy in Egypt and Palestine also became a battleground for the postwar debate over Allied strategy in the Great War. Although more and more evidence is now coming to light which suggests that the traditional division between 'Easterners' and 'Westerners' was a caricature of the wartime debate itself, we ought not to overlook its influence on our later understanding of the war.⁹ For example, Robertson almost certainly deliberately plays down the strength of the Turkish attack upon the Suez Canal in 1915; he

⁷ D. Lloyd George, War memoirs II (London, 1936), p.vii.

⁸ Quoted by E. Kedourie, The Chatham House version and other Middle-Eastern studies (London, 1970), p.14.

⁹ D. French, British strategy and war aims, 1914-16 (London, 1986), pp.x-xi.

describes it as 'this fiasco' which 'never had the least chance of succeeding', presumably in order to strengthen his later arguments that more of Britain's forces ought to have been concentrated in France.¹⁰

A further problem facing any examination of this campaign is what we can only call religious mysticism. Jerusalem, the Zion of the Bible, seems to cast a great shadow over many of the accounts of the EEF's operations. Even the Official History itself admits that 'the spiritual and historical traditions of the country in which they fought had an influence upon the troops' so that they 'could not be indifferent to the sacred memories of the soil which they trod.'¹¹ Hints of this influence can easily be found, for General Murray is often described as a 'Moses', a fact which, after all, should not surprise us, for he also crossed the Sinai, while Gaza, the site of the general's best-known battles, also had biblical connections.¹² And yet these allusions really demonstrate a 'lack of logic', for none of the operations conducted in the Sinai and Palestine were anything like a modern crusade or even a second conquest of the 'Promised Land' of the Jews because there were Christians and Muslims on both sides of the conflict.¹³

Finally, the tragic events at the Dardanelles seem to dominate all accounts of Allied strategy in the Mediterranean in 1915, with the inevitable result that any planning for action in and around Egypt and the important role that this country played in London's

10 Sir W. Robertson, Soldiers and statesmen, 1914-1918, I (London, 1926), p.148.

11 Official History, p.647.

12 See Watkins to Murray 25 Jan 1929, op.cit. and M. Hastings (ed.), The Oxford book of military anecdotes (Oxford, 1985), p.470. For Gaza see Judges 16:3.

13 L. von Sanders, Five years in Turkey (Annapolis, 1927), p.35.

thinking during this period has been neglected. In fact, as early as the 1930s a large library of British, French, Turkish and German accounts of the Gallipoli campaign had already grown up while there was little available for the student of affairs in Egypt and the Sinai during the corresponding period.¹⁴

This lack of attention given to British military policy in Egypt and Palestine up to June 1917 has caused a number of misconceptions to arise concerning this period in literature that does cover it. For example, it helped to create the impression in the popular mind that the campaign only began with the capture of Jerusalem:

This view, entirely erroneous though it be, is not unreasonable, for a thick veil shrouded the doings of the army in Egypt in the early days, and the people at home saw only the splendid results of two years' arduous preparation and self-sacrifice.¹⁵

Moreover, such distortion could even cause basic inaccuracies to creep into some of the popular accounts of the campaign.¹⁶

Having outlined the major reasons why the subject under examination has been neglected we need to make a brief survey of the most important texts consulted. Naturally we must begin with the Official History, because it has formed the basis for all subsequent accounts and offers more detail than any other work. Most opinion has tended to be favourable: Liddell Hart described the account as 'brilliantly readable', while General Murray even went so far as to admit that it

¹⁴ A. Moorhead, Gallipoli (London, 1956), p.365.

¹⁵ A. Bluett, With our army in Palestine (London, 1919), p.2.

¹⁶ See, e.g., E. Dane, British campaigns in the Nearer East, 1914-1918, from the outbreak of war with Turkey to the taking of Jerusalem, I (London, 1918), p.301. Dane tells the reader that the Turkish garrison at El Arish was destroyed in 1916, when, in fact, these troops evacuated the position.

was 'well written, and very fairly apportioned praise and blame.'¹⁷ On the whole one would have to agree with these comments, because, given the material available and the constraints within which they had to write, the two authors, Cyril Falls and Lieutenant-General Sir George MacMunn, did a good job; their final product, however, is open to certain criticisms. The authors admit that they had problems for the period 1914 to 1915 because full records were not always kept by the staff of the troops in Egypt.¹⁸ This is a revealing admission, and it has been possible to trace the precise extent of the documents consulted by the authors through extensive research at the Public Record Office, since Falls often left manuscript notes upon documents that he had examined.¹⁹ From the research it is clear that only a limited number of documents were in fact consulted. Moreover, there is also evidence to suggest that the authors found it difficult to gain copies of certain documents.²⁰ Interestingly enough, the authors seem to have gone to great lengths to draw upon the personal reminiscences of certain of the leading characters involved in the events covered; Maxwell seems to have had more of an influence upon the final result than did Murray, for instance.²¹

Because it claims to be an 'official' version of all military operations in the theatre the authors do at times tend to fall into

17 Liddell Hart to Cyril Falls 10 Dec. 1935, Liddell Hart papers 1/276/14. Lecture at Aldershot by Murray 26 Feb. 1932, Murray papers 79/48/3.

18 Official History, p.vi.

19 For an example of this see a note by Falls 8 July 1925 asking for Eastern Force orders No. 41 and 43 to be copied in WO 95/4450.

20 Chetwode to Edmonds 26 Sept. 1924, Edmonds papers II/1/32.

21 Maxwell to MacMunn 14 Nov. and note by MacMunn on this, CAB 45/79.

the trap of simply listing events without comment. Consequently there is 'a distinct lack of atmosphere' and 'human background', both of which were of particular importance for operations and strategy in Sinai, for example.²² Moreover, one finds very little about bad orders, faulty plans or poor leadership: most of the failures suffered by the British forces tend to be ascribed to the weather, unexpected resistance or the exhaustion of the troops.²³ Indeed, the narrative is weak on the planning of operations at certain points and fails to give an adequate picture of the interaction between higher strategy and the decisions of Maxwell and Murray.

The Australian Official History was published before Falls and MacMunn had completed their task. Although the author looked at some official documents he admits his ignorance at certain points in his narrative; the entire work gives the impression of having been written in some haste - which it most certainly was.²⁴ As one might expect its perspective is unashamedly Australian, so that the actions of other troops are neglected and criticism of non-Australian generals is not uncommon.²⁵ Nonetheless, this has remained an influential work and a recent biography of General Chauvel draws heavily upon it.²⁶

These two texts represent the best printed sources for operations in and beyond Egypt in terms of sheer weight of information. Other works, however, are available. Wavell's The Palestine Campaigns,

22 Brig. A. C. Femberley to Director, Historical Section CID Jan. 1929, CAB 45/79.

23 Lt.-Col. Garsia to Director, Historical Section CID 26 Feb. 1929, CAB 45/79.

24 C. E. W. Bean, 'The technique of a contemporary war historian', Historical Studies Australia and New Zealand, II (1942), pp.65-79.

25 C. Falls, War books: a critical guide (London, 1930), p.7.

26 See Hill, p.117.

although only a fairly short account, was the textbook used by the military academies on the subject. Like his biography of Allenby, however, Wavell's history of the entire campaign suffers from 'the persistent survival of the subjective outlook.'²⁷ One final book that deserves mention here is A Key to Victory by C. Garsia. Lieutenant-Colonel Garsia was a staff officer with the 54th Division in Palestine and his book seeks to redress the failings of the Official History by examining the failures inherent in the planning of the EEF for the battles at Gaza. His stimulating book gains something from the fact that he talked with Kress von Kressenstein, the German officer serving with the Turks in Syria, after the war.²⁸ Incidentally, it is possible to trace the major strategic decisions of both the Turks and Germans during the period by reference to the appendices of the Official History and various German articles.²⁹ In fact, Kress von Kressenstein's own version of the campaign is even available in English translation, as is that of his immediate superior, Liman von Sanders.³⁰

There remain a number of personal accounts of the campaign from the British side which tend to be somewhat idiosyncratic, as one might expect, since they were written by junior officers, common soldiers or journalists.³¹ Finally, the precise course of events surrounding the Turkish attack upon the Canal in 1915 has been very

27 C. Garsia, A key to victory: a study of war planning (London, 1940), p.225.

28 Notes on Egypt and Palestine campaigns by Garsia 10 Oct. 1928, CAB 45/78.

29 Falls and MacMunn saw the official histories of the Turkish General Staff. See also M. Y. Ben-Gavriel, 'Die drei deutschen Versuche, den Suezkanal zu erobern', Deutsche Rundschau, LXXXII (1956), pp.947-50.

30 K. von Kressenstein, 'The campaign in Palestine from the enemy's side', RUSI Journal, LXVII (1922), pp.503-513. Sanders, op.cit.

31 See, e.g., M. S. Briggs, Through Egypt in wartime (London, 1918).

well covered from both the British and French perspectives, although even so the exact nature of British planning to meet this attack had not been understood, as we shall see.³²

Having made this brief summary of the major literature covering British military policy in Egypt and Palestine from 1914 to June 1917 and its weaknesses it should now be clear what the basic objectives behind this thesis are. Perhaps this can be most clearly expressed by reference to a quotation from the Official History about the general strategy of the period: 'It was not until after the First Battle of Gaza had been fought in March 1917 that the Government contemplated the invasion of Palestine.'³³ This kind of assumption is supported by other authorities; for example, Cruttwell describes the EEF's advance to the edge of the Sinai in these terms: 'Murray's forces began gradually, almost imperceptibly, to change from... defenders of Egypt to... invaders of Palestine.'³⁴ It has been one of my main intentions in this thesis to disprove such assumptions and to demonstrate conclusively that the invasion of Palestine was at least 'contemplated' from 1914 onwards, while the posture adopted by the British forces in the region was more energetic and ambitious than is usually admitted.

As a result of this new approach to the period before Allenby's arrival in Egypt a fresh assessment of the careers of both Maxwell and Murray in the country has been possible and proves most revealing. The published biography of Maxwell fails to give an accurate

³² For a French ^{account}/see, e.g., L. Lepotier, 'La guerre des isthmes dans la bataille d'Afrique', Revue de Défense Nationale, XII (1956), pp.1165-81.

³³ Official History II, p.629.

³⁴ C. R. M. F. Cruttwell, A history of the Great War, 1914-1918. 2nd.ed. (Oxford, 1936), p.353.

presentation of his character and merely hints at the fact that he could be a remarkably difficult man, lacking in refinement and too ready to bear a grudge.³⁵ Murray, on the other hand, has had no biographer and yet emerges most favourably from an examination of his unpublished letters, many of which survive, and a careful scrutiny of his own private papers in the Imperial War Museum. Indeed, it becomes clear that earlier writers deliberately played down his role and achievements so that Allenby's successes might appear still more remarkable. For example, Wavell was warned before he published his biography of Allenby not to be too cruel to Murray because he could bring out Allenby's true character just as well without doing this.³⁶ A close friendship and genuine degree of respect between Murray and Robertson also emerges before March 1917 and a deliberate attempt has been made to re-examine the latter's involvement with the Palestine campaign by drawing upon his private correspondence with Murray.

Every effort has been made to place the decisions and events in this theatre in the context of the strategic planning being done in London throughout the period under review. This has revealed the extent to which both Maxwell and Murray were often constrained and pressured into action by their superiors, and especially discloses the intense pressure the EEF was under throughout its time in the Sinai. In order to outline these developments in policy most effectively I have found it convenient to stick to contemporary documents as much as possible, using secondary sources only when

35 G. Arthur, General Sir John Maxwell (London, 1932), p.133: 'Maxwell's letters may have lacked the polish which distinguished the allocutions of at least one of his contemporaries.' It seems likely that Arthur is referring here to Murray.

36 Bartholomew to Wavell no date, Allenby papers 6/VIII/23.

this has been absolutely necessary.

Extensive use of War Diaries has been a feature of this research. By examining not only the diaries of GHQ but also those of other staffs and even specific units it has been possible to reveal new features of the campaign that the Official History was often not even aware of or actually tried to suppress. Thus previously unknown weaknesses within the British forces in this theatre have been discovered. Moreover, the examination of unpublished diaries, letters and papers of such important figures in the campaign as General Chetwode and Guy Dawnay along with lesser-known soldiers adds an entire element to the campaign that the Official History does not even hint at - personality clashes.

Finally, unpublished official documents in the Public Record Office and other private papers have made possible a new approach to the Arab Revolt by uncovering the desire of the soldiers in Egypt to foment it long before June 1916 and their aim to raise the tribal chiefs to the east of Syria rather than in the Hejaz.

CHAPTER 1

EGYPT BEFORE THE WAR:

ITS POLITICAL AND GEOGRAPHICAL SETTING

'I want a well-managed inn to serve as a half-way house on the way to my country place; but I don't want to buy the inn.'

Lord Palmerston

The British Empire in the years before the First World War was rather like a 'huge giant sprawling over the globe, with gouty fingers and toes outstretched in every direction which cannot be approached without soliciting a scream.'¹ Concern with the 'fingers' and 'toes' of the empire took up a great deal of the time of British statesmen. Indeed, such was the regularity with which this subject was raised that it is surprising the topic did not lose any impact simply through sheer repetition.² Nevertheless, it is to one of these 'toes' that we must turn if we are to understand the background to British military policy in Egypt and Palestine during the First World War.

The Suez Canal was opened in 1869, thus greatly increasing direct British involvement in the Near East.³ It did not take long

1 Thomas Sanderson, Permanent Under-Secretary, Foreign Office, 1907, quoted by Z. S. Steiner, Britain and the origins of the First World War (London, 1977), p.18.

2 See J. Morris, Pax Britannica (London, 1968), pp.51-52.

3 C. Smith, 'The emergence of the Middle East', Journal of Contemporary History, III (1968). Smith points out that the names given to various regions in these years were different from those used today. The 'Near East' covered the region of Palestine and Syria; it was also known as 'The Levant.'

for Britain to acquire the Egyptian Government's shares in the waterway, or, for that matter, control of the entire country.⁴ It is possible to trace the origins of this 'annexation' back to the early days of British dominion in India in the eighteenth century, for communications with the 'jewel' of the empire were always at the back of the strategists' minds.⁵ The Suez Canal provided a new, rapid route to India, and although the politicians might wax lyrical over the value of the British civilizing influence in Egypt, it was the canal that mattered.⁶ Moreover, the Egyptian ports of Alexandria, Port Said and Suez made the area into a very important potential military base. This factor was accentuated by the retreat of the Royal Navy from the overtaxing defence of the Dardanelles to the Nile.⁷ In fact, the importance of Egypt and the Suez Canal was seen to be far greater in this period than any interest in new-found oil deposits in the Persian Gulf.

Some have argued that since the British were firmly entrenched in Egypt it was inevitable that one day they would seek territory to the east of the Suez Canal:

History shows that a strong Egypt always aggresses on the middle east, and conversely, England, already in possession of India, is driven, by the old

⁴ Although England governed Egypt the country still remained technically under the authority of the Sultan of Turkey, at least until the outbreak of war in 1914.

⁵ J. Marlowe, The making of the Suez Canal (London, 1964), p.307.

⁶ For example, in June 1910 Arthur Balfour made a long speech on the problems of governing Egypt, but did not make one reference to the Suez Canal. See D. Judd, Balfour and the British Empire (London, 1968), pp.287-289.

⁷ The Royal Navy had, of course, been trying to stop Russia gaining control of the Straits. See Steiner, op.cit., p.18.

Egyptian tradition and by the necessity of joining up strong positions, to build the bridge from Egypt to India. 8

This line of argument might find support in the fact that the army which ultimately advanced from Egypt after 1914 was known as the 'Egyptian Expeditionary Force.' Nor can it be doubted that the 'approaches' to the Suez Canal were sensitive areas so far as British foreign policy was concerned.⁹

Britain was always likely to show some interest in the lands of Palestine and Syria, therefore, especially as this 'limb' of the Ottoman Empire seemed to be growing in importance in the early years of the twentieth century. A War Office report written in 1911 reflected this state of affairs. The report noted that this region had been very important in ancient times since it contained the main lines of communication between the civilizations of the East and West. However, with the decline of the Middle East the communications had been allowed to deteriorate. Nevertheless, a number of new developments might cause Syria to resume its position of importance. These developments included the determination of Turkey to regain her military strength and authority within her own empire, concessions granted by Turkey for the construction of railways and, finally, the impact of European influence, especially in terms of new capital investments. In turn, it was possible that these factors could lead

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- 8 Emil Zimmerman in 'Post' of 16 June 1916, quoted in 'Third Memorandum by the Political Secretary, India Office, on German press opinion regarding the Middle East', CAB 37/156/5. See also I. Friedman, The question of Palestine, 1914-1918 (London, 1973), p.1, for a similar line of argument.
- 9 M. Kent, 'Great Britain and the end of the Ottoman Empire, 1900-1923' in M. Kent (ed.), The Great Powers and the end of the Ottoman Empire (London, 1984), p.183.

to a militarily powerful Turkey, with the eventuality of, amongst other things, there being a rail link for military purposes between the Bosphorus and Syria, or even right up to Egypt.¹⁰ Some of these conditions seemed to have been fulfilled in the years immediately before 1914, for a revolution in Turkey in 1908 initiated what appeared to be a new and energetic régime known as the 'Young Turks', while the construction of the Baghdad railway with German finance greatly facilitated the empire's communications between Asia Minor and Syria. As for anxiety about a Turkish railway that might run all the way up to Egypt, this was very real, and would even cause concern after 1914, so that Lord Cromer could write: 'I am congratulating myself upon the fact that I scuffed out the idea of connecting Syria and Egypt by railway.'¹¹

Official British policy towards the Ottoman Empire before 1914 was that of 'benevolent neutrality.' The Foreign Office aimed at maintaining the integrity of Turkey's domains while avoiding any definite alliances.¹² This meant that the Foreign Secretary often had to declare that the British Government entertained no ambitions in Syria. Official declarations of policy, however, were not always accepted at face value by other European powers. France believed she had a traditional and historic interest in Syria and she was extremely sensitive about British influence being 'the most powerful of all

10 Military Report on Syria. Revised edition by General Staff 1911, WO 33/563.

11 Cromer to Harry Boyle Oct. 1914, Cromer papers. Cromer had been Britain's Consul-General in Egypt.

12 F. Ahmad, 'Great Britain's relations with the Young Turks, 1908-1914', Middle Eastern Studies, II (1966), pp.302-329; M. Kent, 'Constantinople and Asiatic Turkey, 1905-14' in F. H. Hinsley (ed.), British foreign policy under Sir Edward Grey (Cambridge, 1977), pp.436-451.

foreign influences in Syria.¹³ Indeed, although the 'Entente Cordiale' of 1904 led to a search for a working relationship between Britain and France in the Arab countries on the outskirts of the Ottoman Empire, tension remained between the two in Syria.¹⁴ So great was the French fear of real British intervention in Syria that they readily believed rumours about impending British occupations and became particularly anxious whenever Foreign Office officials traversed the country.¹⁵ The problem for France was that the British were more popular than the French among the indigenous population; conflict between these two allies over Syria would continue into the war. Russia made an effort to bolster her prestige in Syria before 1914, so much so that the Turks themselves feared an imminent Russian invasion of the country.¹⁶ Even the Germans had colonies in this region and Jewish settlements could be found in a number of locations.¹⁷ Any military operations in this land, therefore, were bound to lead to international complications.

To this sketch of the general international framework into which Egypt fitted in the years preceding the Great War we must add

13 Reconnaissance of Syria from the coast eastwards June 1908. Part I, p.15. WO 33/456.

14 J. Nevakivi, Britain, France and the Arab Middle East, 1914-1920 (London, 1969), p.1.

15 W. I. Shorrock, French imperialism in the Middle East: the failure of policy in Syria and Lebanon, 1900-1914 (London, 1976), pp.115-135.

16 D. Hopwood, The Russian presence in Syria and Palestine, 1843-1914 (Oxford, 1969), p.210. Russian warships and thousands of Russian pilgrims at Jerusalem regularly made the Turks nervous.

17 There was a German colony just outside Haifa in Palestine, for example. The War Office estimated that there were 100,000 Jewish settlers in Palestine in 1904. See Military Report on Arabia. General Staff 1904, p.20. WO 33/331.

a number of further observations about its geographical setting. When contemporaries spoke of 'Syria' they usually meant the entire strip of country on the Mediterranean coast from the Cilician Gates in the north to Rafah, on the Egyptian frontier, in the south.¹⁸ But this term itself did not correspond with the political divisions of Turkey, the occupying power in the region; nor did it have much meaning for the indigenous population. The Turkish system of local government divided the area into 'Sanjaks' and 'Vilayets': three Sanjaks covered the country from near Tarsus to north of Alexandretta; the Vilayet of Beirut stretched from Alexandretta to north of Jaffa; the Vilayet of Damascus, including the country east of Lebanon and the Jordan, reached from Hama to Aqaba; finally, the Sanjak of Jerusalem covered the land from north of Jaffa to the Egyptian frontier and east to the Dead Sea.¹⁹ To add to the complexity of this arrangement, Lebanon was specially administered from Constantinople because of the troubles there had been between its different inhabitants, Druses, Christians, Turks and Maronites.

Since the Egyptian frontier reached as far as Rafah the Sinai Peninsula was a province of Egypt. The Sinai actually covers an area of some 62,000 km and it takes its name from the mountain so well-known to readers of the Bible. Interestingly enough, the word Sinai comes from a Semitic word ('Horeb') that means dry ground or waste and desolation - a good descriptive term for the whole peninsula.²⁰

18 I have chosen to adopt this use of the term 'Syria' throughout because it corresponds with the contemporary documents quoted. The reader should remember, therefore, that when 'Syria' occurs in the text it includes the area known as 'Palestine', which was usually taken to refer to the country from Tyre to Rafah.

19 See Map 2: Turkish communications and the coast of Syria, before Chapter 6.

20 G. W. Bromiley (ed.), The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia IV (Grand Rapids, 1988), p.526.

In reality the Sinai is divided into two geographical areas: in the south it is largely mountainous, while in the north most of the terrain is sandy desert and chiefly waterless apart from isolated oases. Perhaps most significantly of all there were no modern roads or railways across this vast expanse of desert and mountain, making it a formidable barrier to any would-be traveller. The three routes that did exist were little more than tracks; the most important of these ran near to the coast from Qantara through Romani and El Arish to Gaza. Another route ran via Nekl from Suez to Aqaba, while the third - and most difficult of all - went through Jifjaffa to the Canal at Ismailia. The existence of these tracks and the nature of the terrain through which they passed would dictate to both Turk and Briton alike the size and speed of military operations that could be attempted in the peninsula.

CHAPTER 2

EGYPT ENTERS THE WAR: AUGUST - DECEMBER 1914

'The art of war is to dispose one's troops so that they
are everywhere at the same time.'

Napoleon Bonaparte

EGYPT IN THE EARLY DAYS OF THE WAR

Egypt and its defence played a not insignificant part in British strategy right from the very earliest days of the Great War. On 3 August 1914, at the very first meeting in London of the War Council - a committee hastily assembled by Asquith, the Prime Minister, to discuss the major policy of the war - Winston Churchill, the First Lord of the Admiralty, 'raised the question of bringing Indian troops to Egypt.' In response Lord Kitchener, the Secretary of State for War, argued that one division from India might be sent at once to garrison Egypt.¹ On the next day Kitchener developed this argument more fully by advocating that the regular garrisons of British troops in Egypt, Malta and Gibraltar - making in total about eleven battalions - should be relieved by the troops under order to sail from India.² Even as the earliest moves of the conflict in Europe were taking place Egypt had all but lost its original garrison, therefore. It was Kitchener's intention to use these men as reinforcements in France, if necessary, and his decision to ship troops of the Indian army to Egypt was important since it rapidly established in the minds of the decision-makers in London the idea that Egypt should be a sort of starting-off point where soldiers were prepared for front-line duties in Europe and elsewhere.

¹ War Council meeting 5 Aug. 1914, CAB 42/1/2.

² War Council meeting 6 Aug. 1914, CAB 42/1/3. By this, the second meeting of the War Council, Kitchener had decided to send two Indian divisions, and not one, to Egypt.

Although by making this decision London realised it had subordinated the security of Egypt to the demands of the Western Front, the British authorities in Alexandria were not too displeased by the decision. On the contrary, Sir Milne Cheetham, the acting Chargé d' Affaires, informed the Foreign Office on 9 August that even a small influx of Indian troops would demonstrate to both the Turks and the Egyptian population that the country was 'not isolated from the rest of the world.' When this telegram was passed to the India Office the Military Secretary there saw its significance since, he felt, it had 'an important military bearing' upon the security of Egypt. ³ The Secretary of State at the India Office, Lord Crewe, also understood the fringe benefits of Lord Kitchener's decision and the need to impress the indigenous population:

it has been found desirable to hurry up the two complete divisions from India which we are sending to Egypt, as the attitude... of the charismatic element there, makes it necessary to show strength there. ⁴

It was, in reality, all a matter of projecting an image of apparent military power upon the supposedly easily-influenced minds of the Egyptian people, a policy which had the advantage of allowing the British to hold Egypt with only a skeleton force, as the Military Chief in the country later admitted: 'We all gambled on the large numbers of troops passing through Egypt and the Canal - I have no doubt this had its effect on the population, they were I believe enormously impressed at the number of soldiers at England's call.' ⁵

³ Cheetham to Grey 9 Aug. 1914, L/P&S/10/464/3136. See also note by General Barrow of 10 Aug. 1914: 'Lord Crewe should see this, at once, as it has an important military bearing.'

⁴ Crewe to Curzon 19 Aug. 1914, Curzon papers MSS Eur F112/105A.

⁵ Notes by Maxwell on Egypt in 1914, no date, CAB 45/79.

The notion of a 'gamble' was uppermost in the minds of the British authorities in Egypt when they considered the stark realities of their military impotence in the first few months of the war. For example, although the first transports containing Indian troops reached Suez on 8 September the majority of this force (3rd Indian Division) sailed from Alexandria on 19 September. Meanwhile, with the departure of the original British garrisons on 30 September, the only trained troops present in Egypt consisted of one Indian brigade. Remarkably, the War Office even pressed for these men to be sent to France in October, though it subsequently allowed the unit to remain in Egypt until replaced by the next force of Indian troops to arrive. ⁶ In London Kitchener took a close interest in the exact movements of Indian troops through Egypt and had deliberately held the 3rd Indian Division in that country for just over a week on what he called 'temporary duty', his aim being for this force to secure Egypt while the intended replacements for the pre-war garrison, the 24th East Lancashire Division, made their way from England. ⁷

⁶ For full details of the arrival and departure of Indian troops in Egypt, see Official History, pp. 13-15.

⁷ Secretary of State for India to Viceroy 4 Sept. 1914, and Kitchener to General Duff 4 Sept. 1914, L/MIL/17/5/1618.

These rapid changes in the allocation of troops were due to the increasing demands of France, coupled with concern over Turkish activities to the east of Egypt. Official British policy remained, while Turkey was neutral, to do as little as possible to antagonise the Sublime Porte - even to the extent of preventing British troops from crossing the Suez Canal, although the Egyptian border with the Ottoman Empire lay well over 100 miles to the east, across the Sinai Peninsula, and the Sinai itself had even been evacuated! ⁹ However, behind this almost excessive timidity the British in Egypt had their eyes wide open. On 9 August they picked up reports of Turkish mobilisation being carried out with 'great thoroughness' and, consequently, on the 18th and the 31st of that month the Egyptian Camel Corps was moved to Ismailia 'as a precautionary measure' to watch the approaches to the Suez Canal across the Sinai. ¹⁰ Cheetham was also aware of the potential threat and informed London that if Turkey did enter the war then there was evidence to suggest they contemplated an attack on Egypt. ¹¹ These were prudent words, because Constantinople had ordered preparations to commence for an attack upon Egypt as early as 2 August. ¹¹

⁹ Kitchener to Grey 22 Sept. 1914, F.O. 800/102.

¹⁰ W.D. G.H.Q. Force in Egypt, 9, 18 and 31 Aug. 1914. The Official History (p.13) incorrectly gives the impression that troops were only moved to Ismailia for the first time on 31 Aug. 1914.

¹¹ Cheetham to Grey 28 Aug. 1914, W.O. 106/52.

¹¹ Kress von Kressenstein, 'The campaign in Palestine from the enemy's side' (Translation of 'Between Caucasus and Sinai'), R.U.S.I. Journal LXVII (1922), p. 503.

MAXWELL ASSUMES COMMAND

Meanwhile, Major-General Byng, who had commanded the British garrison in Egypt before the war, was ordered home in the middle of August. His replacement was to be Lieutenant-General Sir John Maxwell, though he did not reach Egypt until 8 September, and in the meantime there seems to have been some confusion in Egypt as to who would command there. Cheetham, however, made it absolutely clear to the Foreign Office that what was needed was a man 'who knows the country'.¹² Maxwell fitted the bill admirably. He had already spent thirty years of his life in Egypt, including four years as the Commanding Officer, and he was also a close friend of Kitchener, who had been behind his appointment.¹³ The civilian authorities in Egypt were happy with Maxwell since they considered him approachable and described him as 'exactly what we required'.¹⁴ That Maxwell had his limitations from a military point of view would become apparent; but he was probably the right man for the job in 1914. There was possibly only one other soldier who was more conversant with Egyptian peculiarities; but unfortunately he was now Secretary of State for War in London.

¹² Cheetham to Grey 19 Aug. 1914, F.O. 800/48.

¹³ Maxwell had been G O C in Egypt 1908-1912. At the start of the war he had been serving as a liaison officer in France.

¹⁴ R. Storrs, Orientations (London, 1943), p.145. For praise of Maxwell's handling of civilian affairs see R. Graham to Sir W. Tyrell, 25 Oct. 1914, F.O. 800/48.

When Maxwell landed in Egypt he found a far from satisfactory situation. One major problem was simply the number of different units embarking, disembarking or passing through the country, a problem that could only worsen, for in October it was decided that the Australian and New Zealand soldiers then on their way to France should be retained in Egypt in order to complete their training. ¹⁵ To Major-General Callwell, the Director of Military Operations at the War Office, this seemed a sensible move; but he was becoming concerned by his chief's tendency to have 'Egypt on the brain.' In fact, Kitchener even managed to get entangled in a serious row with the Colonial Office over his efforts to rush men to Egypt and left his D.M.O. exasperated: 'Whenever Maories or Fiji Islanders or people from Malay volunteer for war in Europe 'K' sends them to Egypt - it will be like a menagerie.' ¹⁶

Unfortunately Egypt was not equipped to be a 'menagerie'. For one thing, Maxwell was desperately short of staff officers to organise such activities. His predecessor did not even have an A.D.C., while he himself only enjoyed the services of a single staff officer, second grade, as his entire General Staff. Moreover, to organise embarkation duties (although these were 'onerous from the first, and increased almost daily') he could count on only eight officers for the three ports of Alexandria, Port Said and Suez. ¹⁷ It is hardly surprising, therefore, that Maxwell's only staff officer at this time admitted after the war that many of the incidents in which he became involved were 'more suitable for relation in a novel than in a history.' ¹⁸

¹⁵ These Australian and New Zealand troops started to arrive in Egypt in early Dec.

¹⁶ Callwell to Henry Wilson 22 Oct. 1914 and Callwell to Henry Wilson 28 Oct. 1914, Henry Wilson papers 73/1/18.

¹⁷ Official History, Appendix 4, p.408. There is no mention of this acute shortage in the main text, nor of the chaos that existed with the rapid transit of so many troops through the country.

¹⁸ Col. Russell to Director, Historical Section, Committee of Imperial Defence, 3 Dec. 1928, CAB 45/80.

The authorities in India made Maxwell's job still more difficult by failing to provide him with sufficient information concerning the Indian troops being sent to him. ¹⁹ Nor was the journey from India itself without complications and a lot of stores were found to have been opened on arrival so that certain units suffered from considerable deficiencies initially. ²⁰ Moreover, while on board ship disease could, and did, break out amongst the soldiers; consequently, permission was needed to leave some of them at Aden in order to prevent further infection. ²¹ Finally, poorly organised embarkation in India combined with the chronic staff shortages in Egypt could lead to sheer chaos once unloading took place. ²² The Lancashire Territorials rushed to Egypt also arrived in a shambles. In fact, Maxwell informed Fitzgerald, Kitchener's secretary, that 1,500 of these men reached him full of lice and so poorly vaccinated that hundreds of them could hardly move. ²³ Kitchener had also decided to send two regiments of Yeomanry to Egypt; but these fared little better since they discovered on arrival that a lot of their equipment had been misplaced and, subsequently, many of their horses died. Sir John was so shocked by this he sent a special report to London on the way these troops were shipped out. ²⁴

¹⁹ W.D. I E F 'E' 23 Oct. 1914, L/MIL/17/5/3893.

²⁰ W.D. No.1 Section Supply & Transport 10th Indian Division 18 Nov. 1914, WO 95/4424.

²¹ Marine Transport Officer to C G S India, 4 Nov. 1914, L/MIL/17/5/3950.

²² W.D. No. 51 Indian General Hospital 19 Nov. 1914 and 3 Dec. 1914, W.O. 95/4743.

²³ Maxwell to Fitzgerald 11 Oct. 1914, PRO 30/57/45.

²⁴ Arthur, p.136.

In spite of this nightmare of muddled bureaucracy Maxwell had started to come to terms with his strategic situation as he perceived it. With admirable objectivity he outlined to Kitchener one particular danger he was determined to avoid: 'I do not want to be led into playing the game Germany evidently wants us to and retain troops here that are wanted in France.'²⁵ However, although he correctly gauged Berlin's policy towards Egypt, he did not do so well as far as Constantinople was concerned, for he believed the Turks would not attempt a major attack across the Sinai though they might try something on a small scale.²⁶ In part, Maxwell's error was due to a basic misconception by the British as to the nature of the Ottoman Empire's army and its capabilities. Before the war there had been a significant body of opinion that argued the Turks simply did not have the ability to equip and organise an expedition of a sufficient size to cross the Sinai Peninsula and threaten Egypt. The Balkan wars in 1912 and 1913 seemed to encourage this view because, it was felt, after such a series of defeats the Turkish military would require time to recuperate.²⁷ Moreover, as Cairo started to receive information concerning German dissatisfaction with Ottoman inefficiency in December 1914 these opinions seemed to have been confirmed.²⁸

²⁵ Maxwell to Kitchener 5 Oct. 1914, PRO 30/57/45.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ 'Reinforcements for Egypt' by Col. Harper, 3 Feb. 1914, W.O. 106/43 C3/41. Harper wrote of the Turks' ability to cross the Sinai: 'It is open to doubt whether these qualities can ever be found in the Turkish army.'

²⁸ 8 Dec. 1914, W.O. 95/4360.

But it was not as simple as this; in fact, there were those in Cairo in 1914 who argued, quite correctly as it turned out, that the Turkish soldier was ideally suited for this type of expedition:

His physical needs are easily satisfied with dirty water, rice and bread, and he is not at all a bad manager of transport animals. It may therefore be supposed that his mobility is greater than his insufficient equipment would lead one to expect. ²⁹

Herein lay the crucial point: so long as the British viewed the Ottoman army through 'European eyes' they would sadly misjudge its capabilities and limitations. While heavy losses and insufficient supplies might well dissuade a European power like Britain from crossing the Sinai because of its sensitivity to the sufferings of its men, this would not be the case for Constantinople. The Turks were quite prepared to 'sacrifice large numbers' in such an operation, because their men were used to terrible hardships and, therefore, they would attack, argued a prominent Egyptian while in conversation with a British officer. ³⁰

²⁹ 'Report re Turkish military preparations and political intrigues having an attack on Egypt as their direct object' by P. Graves, 10 Nov. 1914, W.O. 157/689.

³⁰ Notes by General Birdwood on conversation with son of ex-Khedive of Egypt before attack on Egypt, Birdwood papers, 138 (1).

THE DEFENCE OF EGYPT ALONG THE CANAL

Early in November Britain's position in Egypt, and indeed in the whole of the Near East, became somewhat clearer when London finally declared war on the Sublime Porte after offensive action by the Turks against Russian ports in the Black Sea at the end of October. ³¹ In a sense Maxwell's job became somewhat easier for he could now declare a state of martial law quite acceptably in Egypt, thus making the British army the supreme legal authority in the country and so extending his own power to act should there be trouble. He next suggested to Kitchener in the middle of November that Egypt be proclaimed a British Protectorate, a course of action that was finally taken on 18 November so that the last pretensions of Turkish rule in the country were finally severed, since, on the following day, the pro-Turk Khedive of Egypt was deposed and a British nominee made Sultan in his place. ³² At the same time the title of the British representative was altered from Consul-General to High Commissioner, a change which was, in itself, less than revolutionary for Sir Milne Cheetham remained as acting High Commissioner until Sir Henry McMahon replaced him on 9 January 1915. Nevertheless, a great deal of responsibility now lay upon the shoulders of General Maxwell who had to contend both with Egypt's defence from external aggression and its security from internal unrest, as well as numerous civil matters. Cheetham himself saw dangers in such a situation: 'While recognising the advantages of single control, experience leads me to believe that either civilian or military work here fully occupies the time of one man.' ³³

³¹ Britain did not declare war until 5 Nov. and this delay caused Maxwell some confusion, for on 3 Nov. he informed Kitchener that the Admiralty seemed to be at war with Turkey while the Foreign Office was not! Maxwell to Kitchener, 3 Nov. 1914, W.O. 159/13.

³² Maxwell to Kitchener, 17 Nov. 1914, F.O. 800/102.

³³ Cheetham to Foreign Office, 20 Nov. 1914, F.O. 800/48.

Cheetham was to be proved correct: organising a military campaign and governing Egypt could not be done successfully by one man, as the British were to discover throughout the war.

Turkey's declaration of war brought a fresh impetus to efforts intended to rescue Egypt from attack in the east, especially since reports started to be received that Ottoman forces had occupied El Arish in the Sinai - news which even reached the Cabinet in London. ³⁴ Maxwell had already started to make preparations for the defence of his eastern frontier along the Suez Canal and local civilians found them impressive. ³⁵ However, appearances were deceptive - at least as far as the unskilled eye of the civilian was concerned. In reality, Sir John was desperately short of the necessary staff work needed to organise an adequate defensive scheme and a search had to be mounted for the only copy known to exist in Egypt of a 1910 report outlining the necessary measures required. ³⁶ This report had been written by the G O C Egypt in 1910, General Bullock, and advocated the possible use of some forward positions in the Sinai as a supplement to the natural defensive value of the Canal; and since it was all he had, Maxwell adopted it as the basis for his defensive planning. ³⁷

³⁴ Asquith to King George, 18 Nov. 1914, CAB 41/35/61.

³⁵ R. Graham to Tyrell, 20 Nov. 1914, F.O. 800/48.

³⁶ 28 Nov. 1914, W.O. 95/4360. Captain Russell to Director, Historical Section 3 Dec. 1928, CAB 45/80.

³⁷ 'Remarks on scheme submitted by G O C Egypt for Defence of Suez Canal'. 1 June 1910, W.O. 106/42/ C3/11.

Defensive positions were constructed on both banks of the Canal, therefore. Posts were dug on the east bank to cover the Canal ferries, while on the west bank trenches were positioned between these posts. Some training was done with the troops to try out the various tactical defensive schemes for these separate localities, and there was even a certain amount of planning for 'a decisive counter-attack' against an assaulting enemy force. ³⁸

The Royal Navy had offered to provide fire-support by placing ships in the Canal during a Turkish attack. Such an offer was greatly appreciated; but Maxwell soon discovered that the Navy could be a source of mixed blessings. For one thing, the Admiralty was inclined to order its ships away at a moment's notice - and without even informing the Egyptian authorities. ³⁹ Moreover, if ships were to be used to defend the Suez Canal then they would need as free a passage as possible up and down the waterway. In consequence, the Navy opposed a 'multiplicity of bridges' across the Canal, which was precisely what the local military commanders desired if they were to rush reinforcements to the east bank in order to develop a possible counter-attack. ⁴⁰ Such problems also greatly hindered swift contact between separate units.

³⁸ W.D. 31st Indian Infantry Brigade, 30 Dec. 1914, W.O. 95/4422.

³⁹ Maxwell notes on Egypt in 1914. 18 Aug. 1924, CAB 45/79.

⁴⁰ W.D. Imperial Service Cavalry Brigade, 30 Dec. 1914, W.O. 95/4423.

Nor was the standard of construction work done upon the defensive positions themselves particularly high. Although some brigades worked especially hard, with large working parties being organised daily, this failed to prevent complaints about the quality of trenches when the defences were finally put to the test in February 1915. ⁴¹ For example, Lieutenant-Colonel Dunsford of the 2nd Rajputs complained in the following manner about the trenches around the Toussoum area: 'There were practically no fire trenches ready made in the positions taken up so the men dug themselves into the bank.' ⁴² The major reason for this sort of short coming was simply a desperate lack of engineers available to General Maxwell. Indeed, so bad was the situation that for about ten days in the middle of January 1915 there was only one field company to cover a front of 95 miles. ⁴³

⁴¹ W.D. 22nd Indian Infantry Brigade, 16 Jan. 1915, W.O. 95/4422.

⁴² Report on Operations of 3 & 4 Feb. 1915, by Lt.-Col Dunsford, W.O. 95/4422.

⁴³ Official History, p. 33.

A deficiency of engineering experience probably caused the embarrassing events that followed a decision to reduce the frontage of the Canal that needed to be defended by flooding. A number of holes were made in the Canal bank at Port Said so as to inundate an area of the Sinai to the east. Unfortunately, insufficient thought had been given as to how to control the water, and the result, predictably, was disaster. When the water 'threatened to gain control' 100 Gurkhas were forced to work all day and night in order to attempt to repair the damage, but to no avail since heavy rains and strong winds made the position still worse. Some defensive redoubts were washed away, the local salt works damaged, and as for troops who had been out on reconnaissance beyond the area of inundation, they had to wade back to their original positions through water which reached up to their waists. ⁴⁴

The personnel available to man these defences was almost exclusively Indian. Two Indian divisions (the 10th and 11th), along with the Imperial Service Cavalry Brigade, shared the responsibility with some Egyptian and Territorial artillery batteries. The East Lancashire Division, as well as the Australian and New Zealand contingents, formed a reserve, making the grand total of 64,230 in Egypt. ⁴⁵

⁴⁴ W.D. 69th Punjabis, 26 Nov. 1914. W.D. 29th Indian Infantry Brigade 25-30 Nov. 1914, W.O. 95/4432. See also Official History, p.25 for an account of this policy that does not mention any of the problems encountered.

⁴⁵ 83rd meeting Military Members, Army Council, 20 Nov. 1914, W.O. 163/45.

But the situation was not nearly as reassuring as these figures seemed to suggest. Maxwell held the Territorial and Antipodeans in reserve because they required further training. As for the Indian divisions the very term 'division' was misleading; in reality, they were brigades thrown together in order to create divisions, but they lacked sufficient staff, artillery and divisional troops. Nor did they even have the usual proportion of British battalions like other Indian divisions.⁴⁶ There was also a certain amount of friction within the command-structure since Lord Kitchener forced an additional major-general upon Maxwell. Although the Egyptian commander complained that this freak reorganisation was 'unsuitable and that in any case he had more Major-Generals already than he knew what to do with' Kitchener still got his way. The final result was that Major-General Wilson, whom Maxwell had originally appointed, remained in overall command of all troops along the Canal while Major-General Wallace was given one of the two Indian divisions within the same command.⁴⁷ The Secretary of State's involvement in this affair was not helpful, for two major-generals in the same command did not make for an efficient command even without a potential enemy attack.

⁴⁶ Notes by Gen. Bingley, 23 Oct. 1925, CAB/45/78.

⁴⁷ Callwell to Henry Wilson 6 Dec. 1914, Henry Wilson papers 73/1/18.

Wilson's Indian troops were potentially a source of grave concern, since many of them were Muslims like their Turkish opponents. The enemy was, of course, all too aware of this and made every attempt to encourage disloyalty amongst them, even to the extent of selling copies of the Koran containing anti-British messages. ⁴⁸ Desertions followed. In December thirteen Indian soldiers crossed to the Turkish lines from a unit sent out to search for four men who themselves deserted a day or so before! ⁴⁹ Although the numbers who deserted never reached alarming proportions, this very incident sent ripples as far as London, causing Callwell to remark: 'I am afraid that there will be trouble with the Indian army before many years are out.' ⁵⁰ Meanwhile, the Aga Khan - as the spiritual head of the Ismailite sect of Islam and a loyal servant of the British war effort - noticed some uneasiness amongst the Indian troops while visiting Egypt. ⁵¹ Unfortunately, although the intention of the Aga Khan's visit was to strengthen the loyalty of the Indian troops in Egypt, it became 'a ludicrous failure' because he could only speak to the troops through an interpreter - and they laughed at him. ⁵²

⁴⁸ Col. Bingley to C. in C. India, 2 Dec. 1914, L/MIL/17/5/3894.

⁴⁹ 'Nominal roll of Indian prisoners of war suspected of having deserted to the enemy or of having given information to or otherwise assisted the enemy after capture,' Oct. 1918, L/MIL/17/5/2403.

⁵⁰ Callwell to Henry Wilson, 13 Dec. 1914, Henry Wilson papers 73/1/18.

⁵¹ 'Note by the Aga Khan and M.A. Bailey on the situation in Egypt,' 12 Jan. 1915, CAB 37/123/25.

⁵² 'The Nobel Prize for Peace.' Note by Sir A. Hirtzel, 8 June 1924, L/P&S/10/588/2149.

The problem remained, therefore, and could not be ignored. General Bingley, the Chief Staff Officer of the Canal Defences, tried to explain to the official historians after the war how the issue seemed to dominate proceedings because, although the number of desertions and signs of disaffection remained limited, nobody then knew 'how far the poison would spread.' ⁵³

Egyptian troops, too, might waver in their allegiance. The majority of the Egyptian army was employed for the defence of the Sudan; but some artillery and a few coastguards were on the Canal and vulnerable to enemy propaganda. The Turks used Bedouin Arabs of the Sinai to smuggle letters to these Egyptians to stir up mutiny amongst them, which may well have inspired a number of them to desert some days later. ⁵⁴

Nor could the indigenous population of Egypt be relied upon to remain loyal, especially if a Turkish attack developed on the Canal. Cairo Intelligence, thanks to the fortuitous capture of a German spy, had uncovered plans to 'foment troubles in Egypt by the formation of bands of brigands... in the hope of scattering the British military forces and thus to assist a Turkish attack.' ⁵⁵ The Turks had also been at work; they had been negotiating with Sayed Ahmed, the leader of the Senussi sect of Islam to the west of Egypt, who might raise the Bedouin of Libya against the British - thus providing Maxwell with a possible war on two fronts if the Senussi and Turks co-operated successfully. ⁵⁶

⁵³ Notes on draft chapters by Bingley, Oct. 1925, CAB 45/78.

⁵⁴ Intelligence Report No.9, 18 Nov. 1914, W.O. 157/688.

⁵⁵ The Adviser of the Interior to Cheetham, 19 Oct. 1914, L/P&S/10/464/4359.

⁵⁶ Cheetham to Foreign Office, 10 Nov. 1914, Cheetham papers.

CHAPTER 3

THE POSSIBILITY OF DEFENDING EGYPT OFFENSIVELY: NOVEMBER 1914 - FEBRUARY 1915

'The P.M. gave me a withering look, rolled up the map and muttered peevishly, "You soldiers are all alike; you have no imagination."'

Winston Churchill to Sir James Marshall-Cornwall

THE DEFENSIVE STRATEGY OF EGYPT BEFORE 1914

Although it was apparent to everyone in Egypt in the early months of the war that the country was in a state of military chaos this did not stop serious discussions being held in London about using Egyptian troops aggressively against the Turkish enemy, and these even mushroomed into actual preparations being made by Cairo for an amphibious operation at Alexandretta in February 1915.

One major reason for there being so much enthusiasm for operations in Syria in 1914 was the simple fact that this very subject had been fairly extensively considered before the war. Because of a perceived threat to the security of Egypt from the Ottoman Empire, after an incident in 1906 when Turkey seized the port of Tabah at the head of the Gulf of Aqaba, a Sub-Committee of the Committee of Imperial Defence had examined the question of how best to defend Egypt. Its recommendation was quite straightforward; if the Turks decided to attempt the invasion of Egypt then four divisions were to be landed at Haifa on the Syrian coast where they would cut the lines of communication of the enemy force in its rear. ¹ This scheme of defence had been approved by the C.I.D. itself at its 102nd meeting on 29 June 1909. The General Staff subsequently undertook a serious reconnaissance of the Haifa region; but

¹ 'The military requirements of the Empire as affected by Egypt and the Sudan', 11 Mar. 1909, CAB 11/74.

they remained convinced that it was well suited to the location of an amphibious landing and advance into the interior. However, a fresh Sub-Committee, under the Chairmanship of Lord Esher, was asked to re-examine the matter by the War Office. Although Esher's Committee did not feel an attack on Egypt was very likely, it came to the same conclusion and its report was submitted in July 1910. ² The Haifa plan had won the day over the alternatives partly because of a distaste in military circles for any kind of purely passive defence of Egypt which, it was claimed, would be 'inconsistent with the fundamental principles of conducting war'. ³ Moreover, it was also made clear that unless the Turks attempted an invasion of Egypt on a large scale 'and thereby afford us an opportunity of inflicting a decisive defeat, a defensive attitude on our part... is likely to result in deadlock'. ⁴ Prophetic words indeed and well worth remembering as our examination of events in Egypt and the Sinai progresses; but for now their significance lies in their influence before the war and the evidence they afford of the War Office's dislike of a passive defence of Egypt based, inevitably, upon the line of the Suez Canal alone.

There were other arguments that made a strategic defence based upon the line of the Suez Canal unpopular before the war. For example, allowing the enemy so close to the Empire's main line of communications was surely asking for trouble; after all, it would not be difficult for the Turks to block the Canal. ⁵ What is more, if the Turks were allowed

² Untitled and unsigned paper 24 Nov. 1914 in Secretary's file, CAB 17/11.

³ 'The military requirements of the Empire,' op. cit. Appendix II, Military responsibilities in Egypt and the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan.

⁴ Military policy in a War with Turkey. Capt. Duff 11 July 1906, W.O. 106/42C3/21A.

⁵ Ibid.

to cross the Sinai unopposed and assault the Canal, this might well be perceived as a sign of military weakness by the Egyptian population and could lead to civil strife of some sort. ⁶ The passage of time did not alter the validity of these arguments and they made a defensive line located along the Canal as unpopular in the later months of 1914 as it had been after 1906.

Though Haifa was finally chosen as the best site for an amphibious operation, other towns on the Syrian coast had been considered; these included Beirut, Jaffa, Acre and Alexandretta to the north. Full use was to be made of seapower and the intention had been to confuse the enemy by feints against the coast at different positions; more than one landing might even be executed simultaneously in order most effectively to bewilder the Turks. A possible raid against Gallipoli was even considered as part of this general strategy and not as an operation in its own right. ⁷ These other landing places were all regarded as sites of secondary or supplementary operations in support of action at Haifa. ⁸

But no further action was taken concerning this question after the second type-written report of 1910 had been produced, because the CIGS at the time, Sir John French, believed it so important to concentrate all attention upon the European theatre of war that 'the remoter possibilities of an attack on Egypt ought not to occupy the time of the General Staff'. ⁹ And no such operation was ever attempted by the British, while London's strategy in Egypt and Syria during the First World War rapidly took a course precisely contrary to that recommended

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Operations in Syria should Turkey attack Egypt. 1907, W.O. 106/42C3/26.

⁸ General scheme for an invasion of Syria by an Expeditionary Force. 1908, W.O. 106/43C3/29.

⁹ Untitled paper 24 Nov. 1914, op. cit.

by Morley's committee and the other pre-war planners. Nonetheless, this does not mean that the C.I.D.'s recommendations were entirely forgotten.

The Sub-Committee of the C.I.D. that produced the Haifa strategy was no second-rate, low-key body; the Chairman was the Secretary of State for India (Lord Morley) and its members included Asquith, Grey, Haldane, Esher and Sir John French. These were influential men and Grey and Asquith, for example, were both prominent figures in the direction of British strategy during the first half of the war. Moreover, while we should be careful not to over-emphasize the influence of the C.I.D. before 1914 it is probably safe to say that this report must, at the very least, have implanted an idea in the minds of many leading politicians of the period.¹⁰ And there was one other especially influential figure in Whitehall in 1914 who had played a part in the C.I.D.'s recommendations before the war - Maurice Hankey. The secretary of nearly all the major war-directing committees in London from 1914 to 1918 had actually done a reconnaissance of the Syrian coast while in the Navy before serving as assistant to and then secretary of the C.I.D. itself.¹¹

¹⁰ J.P. Mackintosh, 'The Role of the Committee of Imperial Defence before 1914', English Historical Review, LXXVII (1962), pp. 490-503. As for the work of the C.I.D.: 'The reports were of some value but did not affect the major lines of military or naval policy', p. 495.

¹¹ S. Roskill, Hankey, man of secrets, I (London, 1970), p. 83.



HAIFA IS RECONSIDERED IN 1914

When Turkey finally entered the war and began to threaten Egypt by troop movements in the Sinai, Hankey raised the Haifa option and suggested that a landing might be made there to secure Egypt. ¹² Because the Ottoman Empire had entered a war on a scale which the C.I.D. did not anticipate, he considered that the full force of four divisions would not be necessary to execute the operation; he therefore suggested that only a relatively small force should be required now that the enemy faced campaigns against Russia in the Caucasus and the British in Mesopotamia (where the Indian army had landed troops) in addition to any moves they might make against Egypt. ¹³ Next he approached the Admiralty and the War Office and encouraged them to examine the question once more.

Hankey's approach must have caused a stir, for on the very next day Colonel Talbot at the War Office sent a note to General Callwell outlining the problems of a landing at Haifa. Talbot felt a landing might force the Turks to recall any attack upon Egypt, but that problems would start when the British decided what to do next; he argued: 'If we send an expedition, we shall find it most difficult to withdraw it; and if we leave it there, it may eventually be confronted by very superior Turkish forces.' He concluded therefore that the 'game is not worth the candle'. ¹⁴ However, in spite of this unfavourable response, Callwell himself was drawn by the possibilities open to a force of some 70,000 men which had by then collected in Egypt. He envisaged 'comparatively small bodies of troops' making appearances at coastal towns such as

¹² Hankey to Crease 19 May 1915, CAB 63/5. For reports of Turkish invasions into the Sinai reaching London see, for example, Report of the Cabinet Meeting 18 Nov. 1914 by Asquith to the King, CAB 41/35/61.

¹³ Untitled paper 24 Nov. 1914, op. cit.

¹⁴ Note by Col. Talbot 25 Nov. 1914, W.O. 106/1469.

Jaffa, Haifa, Tripoli and Alexandretta in order to threaten landings or even carry them out under the cover of warships. His observations demonstrated his frustration at being unable to conduct a major operation rather than any profound strategic insight, as he himself admitted: 'The truth is that one does not like to sit still in Egypt doing nothing, but that no offensive operations of a really serious character appear to be practicable.' The CIGS, General Wolfe-Murray, seemed to sympathise with Callwell for, while he agreed that a major landing at Haifa was not possible, his comments were not entirely negative and he recommended waiting for Maxwell's forces to settle down before attempting any 'diversions'. ¹⁵ In a letter to General Henry Wilson Callwell later explained that 'as long as nothing was done beyond temporary occupation of one or two coastal towns, such actions might be possible'. ¹⁶

Meanwhile, the possibility of action at Haifa became a serious topic for discussion at the War Council on 25 November 1914. This was none too surprising, for Churchill had written to Kitchener on the previous day - no doubt prompted by Hankey's suggestion - explaining that he considered action at Gallipoli the best way to fight Turkey, but if that proved impossible he suggested 'you might threaten Gallipoli with a landing and... a concentration there and then turn off sharp to Haifa for the more modest exploit'. ¹⁷ He pursued this same line of reasoning at the War Council and strongly advocated an attack upon the Gallipoli Peninsula which, if successful, would give Britain control of the Dardanelles and allow her to enforce peace-terms on the paralysed Turks; but, he added, if such action was discovered to be 'impractical' then it seemed worthwhile to make only a feint at Gallipoli and make 'our real point of attack' at Haifa or some point on the Syrian coast. Significantly, Churchill supported his arguments by reference to the

¹⁵ Ibid. Note by Callwell 28 Nov. 1914 and comment by Wolfe-Murray 28 Nov. 1914.

¹⁶ Callwell to Henry Wilson 23 Dec. 1914, Henry Wilson papers 73/1/18.

¹⁷ Churchill to Kitchener 24 Nov. 1914, W.O. 106/1469.

recommendations made by the C.I.D. in 1909. However, although Lord Kitchener acknowledged the need for a diversion against the Turks, he did not believe that the time was right for such action, especially since the forces in Egypt were still disorganised. ¹⁸

But this was not the end of the Council's concern over Egypt on 25 November. Anxiety as to Turkish moves in the Sinai meant that if there was to be no operation on the Syrian coast for the moment then the attention of the Council naturally moved to the Suez Canal. The First Lord of the Admiralty detailed the ships available for the defence of Egypt, therefore - but this was not at all what Balfour wanted to hear. He wanted the wells in the Sinai some 30 miles to the east of the Canal to be occupied, or at least destroyed, by the British so that the enemy would find 'great difficulty' in crossing the desert. This very course of action had been advocated by Lord Cromer in October, but it did not find favour with the Secretary of State for War who considered the wells too far from the Canal to make their permanent occupation practicable and very difficult to destroy. ¹⁹

The War Council meeting of 25 November 1914 demonstrated the concern that existed in London for the security of Egypt, a concern that was not satisfied with a purely passive defence of the country along the Canal. It also proved the extent to which the findings of the C.I.D. still had a degree of influence upon British strategy in 1914 even though this has tended to be over-shadowed because of the ultimate triumph of the Gallipoli scheme. Churchill, for example, does not even mention Haifa in his version of the discussions of 25 November 1914, while Hankey in his account graphically describes the impact of the First Lord's speech advocating Gallipoli so that he tends to give the

¹⁸ War Council meeting 25 Nov. 1914, CAB 42/1/4.

¹⁹ Ibid. For Cromer's views on this see Memorandum by Lord Cromer respecting the steps to be taken in event of war with Turkey. 16 Oct. 1914, CAB 37/121/124.

impression that all other subjects were superfluous. ²⁰

Nor did Haifa entirely disappear from the agenda after the end of November. For example, in the early days of 1915 there were still those at the War Office who believed Haifa and Acre were both 'excellent places for disembarking troops' on the Syrian coast. ²¹ And in Egypt Colonel Clayton saw attractions in the Haifa option: 'This plan has the advantage that it would mean the occupation of a district which it is quite conceivable Great Britain might eventually desire to control.' ²² Moreover, according to reports being received at Cairo, the population of the Haifa region believed that the town was the 'key' to Syria and wished for a British occupation of the area. ²³ In February there was still talk in London of 'a dash with 10,000 men to Haifa or Alexandretta' by Maxwell, while in Egypt General Birdwood was calling for a deliberate feint at Haifa to confuse the enemy in order to assist what had by then become a still more popular option - an amphibious operation at Alexandretta. ²⁴ Alexandretta clearly was not, therefore, either the first or the only amphibious operation considered in connection with the security of Egypt in 1914 and early 1915 as the Official History suggests. ²⁵

²⁰ W.S.Churchill, The World Crisis, 1911-1918, I (London, n.d.), p. 437. M. Hankey, The Supreme Command 1914-1918, I (London, 1961), p. 243.

²¹ 'Syria' by Capt. Skeffington-Smyth. 1-2 Jan. 1915, W.O. 106/1569.

²² Intelligence Appreciation Note 3 Jan. 1915 by Clayton, Clayton papers 694/3/1.

²³ 'The following is a brief and necessarily incomplete summary of the views held by prominent and representative Syrians'. No date, Clayton papers 694/3/53.

²⁴ Deedes Diary 5 Feb. 1915. Birdwood to Kitchener 14 Feb. 1915, PRO 30/57/61.

²⁵ Official History, pp. 20-21.

DEFENDING EGYPT AT ALEXANDRETTA

Though aware of the weakness of his own position General Maxwell did not allow his mind to be tied exclusively to a purely defensive approach to the defence of Egypt. For instance, he knew of the plight of the Maronite Christians in the Lebanon who wished for arms to be smuggled to them from their supporters in Greece so that they could defend themselves from any Turkish attacks. On the final day of October 1914 Maxwell informed Kitchener of this matter and explained that if the Maronites were armed they might cause trouble in the rear of any enemy attack on the Canal. ²⁶ Some attention was given to the subject in London and the Admiralty decided that Britain could help the Maronites directly by allowing Cyprus to be used in the transit of the weapons across the Mediterranean; and orders were issued to permit this. ²⁷ However, the whole affair subsequently became far more complicated, for Syrians in the United States offered to form themselves into an auxiliary force in Cyprus, ready to land in the Lebanon; all they wanted from London for this scheme were transport, weapons and permission! The Foreign Office was none too enthusiastic about any of this because they felt it was not worth the bother. ²⁸ Nonetheless, there was a certain attraction about using enthusiastic recruits for offensive operations in Syria while Egypt could not spare sufficient troops herself. The War Office recognised this to a certain extent. Early in November a Mr Bleed, a civilian who had lived in Palestine for ten years, wrote to the War Office and suggested that with proper encouragement 100,000 Jews in all parts of the world and many Syrian Christians could be enlisted to conquer Palestine from the Turks via Egypt and the Caucasus. Although Callwell recommended the rejection of this particularly ambitious plan, one of his subordinates, Major Holland, made the following most

²⁶ Arthur, p. 136. Maxwell to Kitchener 31 Oct. 1914.

²⁷ Admiralty to Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs 3 Jan. 1915, FO 371/2479/1820.

²⁸ Maj. K.El-Aswad Bey to Sir Cecil Spring-Rice 1915 and FO minutes 9 Mar. 1915, FO 371/2480/27310.

revealing comment: 'The reconquest of Palestine by the Jews sounds alluring.' ²⁹

Maxwell's enthusiasm for offensive action of some kind in Syria soon proved decisive in terms of planning for amphibious operations. Early in December, Callwell admitted that Kitchener wanted to embark on 'Syrian adventures', but that there were no troops available. ³⁰ Nevertheless, the Secretary of State asked Maxwell for his views on the subject and on 4 December 1914 Kitchener received his reply: if a diversion was contemplated then the best location would undoubtedly be at Alexandretta. ³¹ Moreover, offensive action did not seem quite so outlandish as December progressed, for the Australian and New Zealand contingents landed in Egypt early in the same month; in fact, Callwell believed these new troops might be used along the Syrian coast. ³²

There were good reasons for Maxwell favouring Alexandretta. For one thing, as early as 1904 the General Staff had acknowledged it to be one of the best landing places in Syria. ³³ Moreover, its geographical location had become of great strategic importance - at least, the British believed this to be so. Although Alexandretta itself was only a terminus of a branch line of the Turkish railway connecting Constantinople to Syria and Mesopotamia (known as the Baghdad railway) this was misleading, for, in reality, the port played a crucial role in the enemy's communications. Because the rail tunnels through the Amanus mountains had not been completed by 1914 and the only other route

²⁹ Ashland Bleed to War Office 2 Nov. 1914. Minutes by Callwell 11 Nov. and Holland 12 Nov., W.O. 32/11347.

³⁰ Callwell to Henry Wilson 2 Dec. 1914, Henry Wilson papers 73/1/18.

³¹ Arthur, pp. 153-154. Maxwell to Kitchener 4 Dec. 1914.

³² Callwell to Henry Wilson 23 Dec. 1914, op.cit. Callwell's attitude towards a landing at Alexandretta was complex; he seems to have opposed a major operation involving permanent occupation, but still favoured 'temporary occupation' of 'one or two coast towns', as he had suggested in November.

³³ Military Report on Arabia. General Staff. 1904, W.O. 33/331.

through these mountains - the road - was not even suitable for wheeled transport, until 1916 the quickest way to move supplies to Syria or Mesopotamia actually involved moving them by train to Alexandretta, and thence by road to Aleppo or to a station just west of it, where they rejoined the main line. It followed, therefore, that if the British could occupy the town then the Turks would be forced to use the Amanus road if they wished to keep their communications with Syria open; and during the months of January to March this road was more or less closed. ³⁴ This seemed most appealing to Egyptian Intelligence who began to argue that 'if Alexandretta is held and the Syrian coast guarded nothing further can reach Syria or Baghdad'. And this was not at all surprising, since they began to pick up a great deal of information about enemy stores and equipment pouring through the town presumably on their way to the Egyptian frontier. ³⁵ Added emphasis was given to this movement of supplies and to the entire region around Alexandretta by the activities of a British cruiser; HMS 'Doris' sailed up the Syrian coast bombarding Turkish positions and landing raiding parties to disrupt their communications at a number of locations, but especially around Alexandretta, where the ship shelled the railway, destroyed bridges and even came to an agreement with enemy troops to disable some railway engines! ³⁶

Meanwhile, in London, two memoranda produced and circulated to the War Council within days of each other gave added emphasis to the coast of Syria in British strategy. The first of these, written by Maurice

³⁴ For further details see W.R. Stanley, 'Review of Turkish Asiatic railways to 1918: some political - military considerations', Journal of Transport History, VII (1966), pp. 189-200. The reader is recommended to have a look at the map of Turkish communications to understand the significance of Alexandretta. The construction of the Baghdad railway gave Alexandretta an added significance it had not had before 1914.

³⁵ 'Notes on Turkish forces in Syria' 15 Dec. 1914, W.O. 157/689.

³⁶ HMS 'Doris.' Report of proceedings off Syrian coast. 14 to 27 Dec. 1914, CAB 37/124/13. This report was circulated to the War Council and had a profound impact on its members.

Hankey, expressed frustration at the deadlock in France and sought a solution to this in an attack on Germany's allies; initially his attention was drawn to the Balkans but, he explained, if further action was not possible there then 'an attack in Syria would prove a severe blow to Turkey'. ³⁷ Although this memorandum was lacking in detail and did not even outline where in Syria this attack was to take place, it nonetheless correctly gauged the existing atmosphere in the War Council and impressed the Prime Minister. ³⁸ Balfour, however, was quick to point out the basic problem with any action against Turkey; while he also saw the need to hit the Ottoman Empire as hard as possible, he reminded Hankey that any such operations 'however successful, must be regarded as merely subsidiary'. ³⁹

The second memorandum was penned by Lloyd George and in many ways bore a remarkable resemblance to Hankey's. Interestingly enough, Hankey actually wrote to the Chancellor on 2 January 1915, before he had even seen the Welshman's paper, enclosing his own memorandum because, he believed, they both had 'not very dissimilar' views - and he was quite correct. ⁴⁰ Lloyd George, like Hankey, was exasperated by the slow progress on the Western Front and looked elsewhere for the decisive blow; again, like Hankey, he looked initially to the Balkans for inspiration; but his second operation was to be against Turkey and was to involve the calculated risk of allowing the enemy to 'entangle themselves' in an attack on Egypt so that a British force of 100,000 could be landed in Syria to cut them off, thus dealing a crushing blow to the Ottoman army and enabling London to order the occupation of Syria. ⁴¹ So far Lloyd George's ideas bore a close resemblance to those

³⁷ Memorandum by Hankey 28 Dec. 1914, CAB 37/122/194.

³⁸ H. H. Asquith, Memories and Reflections 1852-1927, II (London, 1928), pp. 51-52.

³⁹ Balfour to Hankey 2 Jan. 1915, B. M. Add. MS. 49703.

⁴⁰ Hankey to Lloyd George 2 Jan. 1915, Lloyd George papers C/4/19/2.

⁴¹ 'The war: suggestions as to the military position' by Lloyd George 1 Jan. 1915, CAB 42/1/8.

of the C.I.D. before the war, although it has been argued that he was actually thinking of Alexandretta and not Haifa as the site of his amphibious attack. ⁴² It would seem quite likely, as well, that the Chancellor was drawing on the ideas of men around him, for this was the usual way in which he formulated new policies; and he was, after all, no military expert at the end of 1914. ⁴³ Nonetheless, he did have the courage to express his convictions firmly and he believed in them sufficiently to pass them on to those who he thought ought to see them. ⁴⁴ Moreover, there was one element in Lloyd George's memorandum that appears to have been completely unique, for he argued that a British success in Syria offered the possibility of 'a dramatic victory... in territory which appeals to the imagination of the people'. ⁴⁵ This point of view he would forcefully state again in the future; but for the present his ideas were not totally ignored, for Asquith described them as 'quite good', for example. ⁴⁶

Meanwhile, the War Office now started seriously to consider operations at Alexandretta. ⁴⁷ What seems to have stimulated the military experts in London was a telegram sent by Cheetham on 5 January 1915. Cheetham suggested Alexandretta as 'the spot at which a decisive stroke at the Turkish lines of communications could be dealt most

⁴² 'Lloyd George and the strategy of the war. Evidence from documents upon the question' by Liddell Hart. Liddell Hart papers 1/450/file 1.

⁴³ See A.J.P. Taylor (ed), Lloyd George: a diary by Frances Stephenson (London, 1971), p. 21.

⁴⁴ D. Lloyd George, War Memoirs of David Lloyd George, I (London, n.d.), p. 214. He appears to have sent the original copy of this memorandum dated 31 Dec. 1914 to Asquith. See MS Asquith 133 folio 12-20.

⁴⁵ 'The war, suggestions as to the military position,' op. cit.

⁴⁶ Asquith. p. 54.

⁴⁷ C.E. Callwell, Experiences of a dug-out 1914-1918 (London, 1920), p. 61. Callwell writes that this was the first time he actually considered any problem under the heading 'operations' with Kitchener, which suggests that the discussions over Haifa in 1914 never reached the Secretary of State.

effectively'. ⁴⁸ The War Office's immediate reaction was favourable; Alexandretta, the General Staff argued, offered real possibilities as only 'a comparatively small force' would be needed - at least at first. Some further thinking was done upon the subject and a rough scheme was drawn up for an advance by three columns from Alexandretta towards the Baghdad railway with the intention of disabling it. ⁴⁹ All the time, however, the numbers of troops believed to be required seemed to be rising. On 8 January 1915, for example, Kitchener mentioned the matter at the War Council and explained that as many as between 30,000 and 50,000 troops could be necessary, while the Directorate of Military Operations now estimated 21,000 in a detailed examination of the proposed landing. ⁵⁰ By the time the subject was mentioned again at the War Council on 13 January 1915 Kitchener had started to get cold feet; he explained that 'a very good scheme' had been produced and 'it would be kept in mind' but as yet the troops in Egypt were not sufficiently trained to execute it. ⁵¹

Even though the decision by the Secretary of State naturally dampened enthusiasm for Alexandretta in London it did not extinguish it. In fact, as it became obvious that the Turks had made a serious attack upon the Suez Canal in February so this enthusiasm was rekindled. It would seem that both Kitchener and Maxwell had decided to delay matters in order to gain more accurate information as to precisely what the Turks were up to before they acted on the Syrian coast, as Callwell explained to General Robertson on 13 February 1915: 'I should not wonder if part of the force in Egypt very shortly made an attack on Alexandretta. I have been wanting this to be undertaken for some weeks, but both Lord K. and Maxwell preferred to wait until the attack on the

⁴⁸ Cheetham to F.O. 5 Jan. 1915, Clayton papers 693/9/1.

⁴⁹ 'Note on Mr Cheetham's Proposals for Operations in Syria' by General Staff. Jan. 1915, W.O. 106/1570.

⁵⁰ War Council meeting 8 Jan. 1915, CAB 42/1/12. Expedition to Alexandretta 11 Jan. 1915, W.O. 106/1570.

⁵¹ War Council meeting 13 Jan. 1915, CAB 42/1/16.

Canal had declared itself'. ⁵² Indeed, Callwell himself had wanted the attack to go in at the very end of September when a lot of ships were actually available. ⁵³

All these developments certainly had a great impact in Egypt. According to General Birdwood, Maxwell came to see him and explained that he had just received a wire from Lord Kitchener asking if Birdwood might take 5,000 of his Australian troops to Alexandretta. Birdwood agreed to this and Sir John telegraphed this information to London; there followed another message from the War Office asking if Birdwood believed 5,000 would be enough for such a venture. Birdwood's reply to this, through Maxwell, was that he thought the operation really needed the entire Australian Army Corps if it was to be successful. Nonetheless, a few days later he received a communication ordering him to go ahead with the necessary preparations for such an action and he and his staff subsequently 'went into all details for landing and had all... plans ready' for the seizing and holding of the necessary positions around the Baghdad railway inland from Alexandretta. ⁵⁴ The first of these messages seems to have reached Birdwood on 23 January 1915 and his personal reaction was most favourable, even to the extent of the general actually suggesting that some old rifles from India might be used to arm the local Armenians in the region of Alexandretta, since he believed they would support his troops. ⁵⁵ The extent to which preparations for actions at Alexandretta influenced the Force in Egypt can be seen by the fact that its Indian troops were grouped together administratively because they might be needed for this operation. ⁵⁶

⁵² Callwell to Robertson 13 Feb. 1915, Robertson papers I/8/5.

⁵³ Callwell to Robertson 1 Feb. 1915, Robertson papers I/8/4.

⁵⁴ Birdwood to Ellison 13 Apr. 1924, W.O. 161/84.

⁵⁵ Birdwood to Kitchener 23 Jan. 1915, PRO 30/57/61.

⁵⁶ Notes on draft chapters by A.H. Bingley, CAB 45/78.

However, although the military in Egypt were all ready to go to Alexandretta their diplomatic brethren were now less sure about this course of action. For one thing, they knew that Paris regarded Syria as a region of French influence, a fact which Cheetham had commented on in his original telegram of 5 January 1915. In London the Foreign Office began to realise the full implications of any British military action in Syria and even described it as 'the most difficult issue of the war'. Matters were made much more difficult for McMahon in Egypt by the inflammatory way in which the local papers handled the affair, so that he was forced to censor many of them. ⁵⁷ The situation was worsened by the arrival of a French Military Mission in the country in February; in fact, permission for the arrival of this unit had been agreed upon in January and its appearance now was unfortunate rather than evidence of immediate French concern over the future of Syria. ⁵⁸ Nonetheless, the threat of serious objections by the French to any action by London at Alexandretta remained a serious barrier to this operation throughout 1915. ⁵⁹

But the major obstacle to a serious attack at Alexandretta was Winston Churchill, as Callwell admitted 18 months later: 'We all wanted to go to Alexandretta last January year, instead of embarking on the Dardanelles adventure; but Winston was too many for us and dragged Lord K. and the Government after him'. ⁶⁰ Gallipoli now started to take the centre-stage in London as the navy and army prepared for action there and Kitchener's attention was distracted from the coast of Syria. ⁶¹ Since the preliminary bombardments at the Dardanelles began

⁵⁷ Minute by G.R.C. 3 Mar. 1915 and McMahon to Grey 15 Feb. 1915, FO 371/2780/23865.

⁵⁸ Grey to Kitchener 9 Jan. 1915, FO 800/102. Kitchener to Grey no date, FO 371/2355/4552.

⁵⁹ Ironically Haifa did not create such problems, since it did not fall within France's area of perceived influence in Syria.

⁶⁰ Callwell to Wingate 7 Aug. 1916, Wingate papers 139/2.

⁶¹ G.H. Cassar, Kitchener: architect of victory (London, 1977), p. 260. Cassar admits that Kitchener initially found Alexandretta more appealing than Gallipoli.

in February it is clear how they managed to snuff out further speculation over Alexandretta just as it was becoming most interesting because of the Turkish attack.

It is idle to speculate too much as to whether a chance was missed at Alexandretta in January and February 1915. On the other hand, it is surely of some significance that contemporaries certainly believed this to be the case. In September 1915, for example, Lord Hardinge believed it would have been 'far better and just as useful' if London had decided to attack at Alexandretta rather than Gallipoli. ⁶² Moreover, in May of 1916 the entire issue was re-examined in Egypt and the conclusion was most revealing: these operations 'appeared to offer favourable prospects' it was decided. ⁶³ Finally, those who observed the Turkish retreat after their attack on the Canal on 3 February 1915 believed the disorder caused by these men was so great that not only the Christian peoples of the area but 'even the Mohammedan population were hoping that the Allies would push their victory and land troops in Syria'. ⁶⁴

⁶² Private letter from Lord Hardinge 17 Sep. 1915, MS Asquith 15 folio 13-14.

⁶³ Memorandum regarding operations in the Gulf of Iskanderun by G. Dawnay. 3 May 1916, W.O. 95/4362.

⁶⁴ A. Aaronsohn, With the Turks in Palestine (London, 1917), p. 70.

CHAPTER 4

THE TURKISH ATTACK UPON THE CANAL : 3 FEBRUARY 1915

'I am much blamed by the wiseares back home...
for not having followed the Turks up when they were
defeated on the Canal... I played the game and did
nothing to jeopardise operations on the Western theatre.'

General Maxwell, 8 February 1915

THE BUILD UP TO THE ATTACK

Intelligence in Egypt had long been aware of Turkish preparations for an attack on the Suez Canal and the advance of the enemy force was followed in some detail. In fact, so sure were the Egyptian authorities that an attack would take place that they issued a statement to the press to this very effect on 11 January 1915. Their confidence was due to detailed estimates of the capabilities and movements of Turkish forces in Syria: one report emanating from the Intelligence Department, for instance, correctly assumed there was 'ample water' in the Sinai for an attacking army because of recent heavy rain, and that the Turks could bring heavy guns within range of the Canal in spite of the poor roads. ¹

The attack was expected to come on 27 January 1915, the Kaiser's birthday, but it did not materialise on that date. ² Instead, the Turks seemed to halt at Beersheba, in Syria, apparently to wait for their heavy artillery; and from this point onwards Egyptian Intelligence started to fail. ³

¹ Intelligence paper 10 Jan. 1915, W.O. 157/689. This very accurate information did not reach the front line units so that these were surprised by the heavy shell fire from the enemy positions.

² McMahon to Grey 25 Jan. 1915, F.O. 800/48.

³ W.D. 11th Indian Division, 31 Jan. 1915, W.O. 95/4422.

The British assumed that the enemy would cross the Sinai direct by the northern route, along the coast. Unfortunately the Turks did not oblige and marched through the Sinai by a more central route, thus nearly catching the British by surprise at a time when so far all had gone exceptionally well in terms of accurate intelligence. ⁴

Meanwhile, the British had not merely been observing these events in a state of paralysis - preparations were underway to meet the attack. As late as 20 January 1915 Indian units were still seeking to render useless wells and watering-holes in the Sinai that might be used by the advancing enemy, while along the Canal some of their brothers had worked hard on improving the defences. ⁵ On 23 January the 'general scheme of defence... was explained and final arrangements... were discussed' at a meeting of all the Commanding Officers. ⁶ The principles involved in this defensive scheme had already been outlined by General Maxwell earlier in the month after he had been informed of a plan by one of his subordinates to occupy an advanced position in the Sinai. He had explained that the defence was to be on 'purely passive lines', and that only counter-attacks and short pursuits of the enemy after he had been defeated on the main line of defence were to be undertaken. ⁷ This very cautious approach was itself an interpretation of orders issued by Kitchener warning the G O C Egypt not to risk a British reverse 'owing to the precarious position at that time in France.' ⁸

⁴ 6 Jan. and 24 Jan. 1915, W.O. 95/4360.

⁵ Lt.-Col. Bambridge to Major A.K. Rawlins 20 Jan. 1915, W.O. 95/4404. W.D. 22nd Indian Infantry Brigade 15 Jan. 1915, W.O. 95/4428.

⁶ W.D. 28th Indian Infantry Brigade 23 Jan. 1915, W.O. 95/4421.

⁷ W.D. Suez Canal Defences 11 Jan. 1915, W.O. 95/4417.

⁸ Official History, p.49. Gen. Bingley to MacMunn 18 Nov. 1925, CAB 45/78.

But Maxwell's subordinates were not nearly so cautiously minded as Lord Kitchener might have hoped. In fact, for a time, while the enemy appeared to have halted in the middle of the Sinai the British seriously contemplated taking action themselves. General Bingley suggested that if the Turks remained stationary 'it will be as well in due course to go out and attack one or other of his detachments.'⁹ Moreover, General Birdwood went to see Maxwell and asked for permission to march one division about five miles east of Ismailia so as to meet the advancing Ottoman force head on or take it in the flank if it went north or south of this position.¹⁰ Meanwhile, even the Secretary of State had become dissatisfied with his own guide-lines; at the War Council on 28 January 1915 he suggested an attack by sea on Gaza, on the Syrian coast, if the Turks continued their advance.¹¹ These plans and discussions demonstrate that it is wrong to assume, as has been done, that an 'active defence was never contemplated' by the Force in Egypt along the Canal in January and February 1915.¹²

As for the Turkish force that had halted, and so confused Cairo, it was nominally under the command of Djemal Pasha - the supreme commander of the entire province of Syria - but in reality executive power lay with Colonel Kress von Kressenstein, a German officer of impressive ability. Fortunately for the British, however, these two men found each other's company hard to stomach and their mutual dislike cannot have assisted the implementation of their plans.¹³

⁹ 'Notes on Situation,' 27 Jan. 1915 by A.H. Bingley, W.O. 95/4360. Gen. Wilson approved of this plan.

¹⁰ Notes by Birdwood on conversation with Maxwell, Birdwood papers 138 (ii).

¹¹ War Council meeting 28 Jan. 1915, CAB 42/1/26. This strategy had been posed before the war. See 'The Question of military action in or near the Sinai Peninsula' 5 May 1906, W.O. 106/42 C3/13B.

¹² Australian Official History, p. 40.

¹³ 'Note on the intentions of the enemy' 11 Feb. 1915, W.O. 157/689. Cairo picked up evidence of this quarrel between the two men.

The expeditionary force itself consisted of about 20,000 men with some field artillery and a battery of heavy guns, which would prove a real nuisance to the defences of the Canal. ¹⁴ But its real intentions remain somewhat unclear - even now. The official aim was to capture Egypt and Djemal Pasha made much of this by giving his army the appearance of a crusading force on its way to liberate their fellow Moslems in Egypt from the yoke of Christian oppression. ¹⁵ And yet this was by no means the full story, since Djemal's colleagues in Constantinople were extremely dubious about his prospects of success while the Germans attached to his force feared a disaster; and even he himself had little hope of success. ¹⁶

The Turks did, on the other hand, have what they believed to be one advantage - a sympathetic population in Egypt. As we have already seen, there had been attempts in 1914 by the enemy to enlist the support of Egyptian popular feeling and now they hoped these would bear fruit. Unfortunately, there had been a development in Egypt that now made such an eventuality increasingly unlikely. The arrival of the Australians and New Zealand contingents in December 1914 had a remarkable impact in the country; according to one officer these men so 'completely overawed' the Egyptians by their appearance and indiscipline that their continued presence made any serious trouble most unlikely. ¹⁷

¹⁴ Official History, p. 51.

¹⁵ F.G. Weber, Eagles on the Crescent: Germany, Austria and the diplomacy of the Turkish Alliance, 1914-1918 (London, 1970), p. 99.

¹⁶ Djemal Pasha, Memories of a Turkish statesman, 1913-1919 (London, no date), p. 154. For German opinion see 'Turkish Invasion of Egypt. Summary of news since 7 Jan. 1915.' 20 Jan. 1915, W.O. 157/689.

¹⁷ Notes by Gen. Bingley 23 Oct. 1925, CAB 45/78.

Since a rising in Egypt rapidly proved out of the question, the Turks found themselves having to adopt more limited aims. These involved making a sort of reconnaissance in force to test out the defences, keep London's attention fixed on the Canal and even try to do some serious damage to the tenability of the British position along the Canal by attempting to blow up the Sweet Water Canal and so deprive the defending troops of fresh water.¹⁸ They also hoped to use their heavy artillery to sink Allied shipping in the Canal and so block the great waterway as a vital line of communication for the British Empire.¹⁹ The Turks, no doubt aided by their German friends, also seriously considered how best to cross the Canal in order to hold both sides of it while the maximum amount of damage could be inflicted; according to a later British report on the enemy's preparations for this operation, using rafts and pontoons, 'great attention' was paid to detail.²⁰

The Turkish expedition against the Canal in February 1915 ought not to be lightly dismissed as a 'fiasco' that 'never had the least chance of succeeding', therefore, as some later argued.²¹ In fact, this attack presented the British authorities in Egypt with real difficulties, as we shall see, and General Sir Archibald Murray even believed that it offered the Turks 'more possible prospect of success' in their campaign against Egypt than at any other time during the war.²²

18 G. Bell to Cromer 29 Nov. 1915, WO 79/64. The Official History (p.36) is mistaken when it claims there was no evidence of the Turkish troops carrying explosives.

19 Captured Turkish Army Order No. 22, WO 95/4417.

20 'Technical report on Turkish attempted crossing Suez Canal between Toussoum and Serapeum February 1915', WO 95/4360.

21 Robertson, I, p.148.

22 Lecture at Aldershot by Murray 26 Feb. 1936, Murray papers 79/48/3.

THE COURSE OF THE BATTLE

Kress von Kressenstein finally launched his attack in the early hours of 3 February 1915. The main assault came upon the Canal just below Toussoum, between Lake Timsah and Serapeum, while there was a diversionary move against the ferry post at Ismailia to the north. Although the Turks failed to achieve surprise at Toussoum, they had gone to great efforts to obtain this and it was largely the disobedience of their own troops, and not the vigilance of the defenders, that prevented it. ²³ On reaching the eastern bank of the Canal some of their troops tried to cross it by launching the pontoons and rafts they had brought for this purpose; but the fire of the 62nd Punjabis and a Egyptian battery rapidly made this very difficult. Nonetheless, showing considerable bravery, the Ottoman troops paddled three of these craft across the Canal to the other bank; and yet it was all to no avail for these men were soon either all dead or captured. In spite of this setback the enemy had not given up, for as the sun began to rise they started a major attack against Toussoum; this assault was defeated by the combination of a British counter-attack over the Canal and the fire power of Allied warships that had collected in the Canal in order to supplement Maxwell's defences. ²⁴ Meanwhile, at Ismailia - though the attack at this point was only a diversion - the Turkish heavy artillery began to cause considerable problems for the warships; in fact, two of them came under such heavy fire that they had to take evasive action and it was not until the offending enemy howitzer had been located and silenced that 'a serious danger' to the Canal was removed. ²⁵

²³ Captured Turkish Army Order No.21 21 Feb. 1915, W.O. 95/4417. The troops were ordered to march in silence but they started to shout as they attacked.

²⁴ It is possible to follow the activities of the British ships involved in some detail by reference to their logs in the Public Record Office. See, for example, that of HMS 'Swiftsure' 3 & 4 Feb. 1915, ADM 53/62022.

²⁵ Official History, p. 44.

But by the middle of the afternoon of 3 February the attack was actually coming to an end, though this was not immediately obvious to the defenders, since the Turks continued to shell Toussoum, for example, until 2 p.m. These, then, are the bare facts of the battle for the Canal in February - but the basic events of that day conceal the very serious problems faced by General Wilson during the engagement.

This action was no picnic for the Force in Egypt and, although there is no mention of it elsewhere, the British were nearly seriously embarrassed. The fighting around Toussoum was fierce and even the official account admits that 'casualties among the defenders began to mount up.' ²⁶ These casualties were almost exclusively Indian on the British side and became a source of some anxiety to Wilson and his subordinate commanders. For one thing, the hospital units of the Indian army proved quite incapable of dealing even with this limited number of wounded because of 'shortage and defects of equipment.' ²⁷ Still more worrying for the authorities was the nature of the wounds themselves, for many of these bore all the classic hall-marks of having been self-inflicted, since 'the proportion of those wounded in the left hand' was 'very large'. ²⁸ According to an India Office report upon this very subject if a right-handed soldier shoots himself he will usually do so in his left hand, and 'there is an extraordinary well marked preponderance of wounds of the hand in certain classes of fighting.' ²⁹

²⁶ Ibid., p.41 The Official History gives a good account of the battle itself (pp.37-52) but makes no mention of any anxiety about the British troops engaged.

²⁷ W.D. No.5 Indian General Hospital 12 Feb. 1915, W.O. 95/4743.

²⁸ W.D. No.8 Indian General Hospital 12 Feb. 1915, W.O. 95/4743.

²⁹ 'An analysis of 1,000 wounds and injuries received in action with special reference to the theory of self-infliction' by Col. Seton, L/MIL/17/5/2402.

Clearly, therefore, Indian troops were not performing well under fire in Egypt and the India Office admitted in 1918 that there had been 'trouble' with some of their troops in Egypt in 1915.³⁰ The extent to which these problems amongst the Indian troops influenced the British high command can be shown by General Bingley's later assertion that anxiety about the uncertain loyalty and fighting-spirit of these men caused Wilson to be most cautious in any serious pursuit of the retreating enemy forces.³¹

³⁰ 'Employment of Pathans in Palestine' by Gen. Barrow 7 Feb. 1918, L/MIL/5/733.

³¹ Gen. Bingley to McMunn 18 Nov. 1925, CAB 45/78.

THE FAILURE TO PURSUE THE RETREATING ENEMY FORCE

One major point at issue concerning the Turkish attack upon the Canal is whether Maxwell missed a chance to inflict a more serious defeat upon his opponents. There was certainly a feeling running through all the ranks of the Force in Egypt immediately after the battle that the invaders had been 'very cheaply let off and might have been far more effectively cut up as they retreated.'³² Naturally, Sir John himself was not unaware of this air of criticism and it still bothered him exactly a year later; nevertheless, he felt the complaints were unfair because he considered that he had faithfully executed the instructions given to him by Lord Kitchener before the battle.³³ This line of argument has been followed by at least one historian who claimed that the Secretary of State for War ought to take the responsibility for the British failure in February because he ordered Maxwell to avoid a serious reverse.³⁴

In order to make an accurate assessment of this matter we need to examine briefly the course of events after the battle died down on the afternoon of 3 February 1915. On the morning of the following day the British troops holding positions around Toussoum were genuinely astonished to discover that the Turks had slipped away in the night. Now, it would seem, was the time for Maxwell to counter-attack by pursuing in strength a defeated and demoralised enemy struggling back across the Sinai.

³² R. Storrs to Fitzgerald 12 Feb. 1915, PRO 30/57/47.

³³ Maxwell to Henry Wilson 8 Feb. 1915, Henry Wilson papers 73/1/20.

³⁴ C.R.McCruttwell, A History of the Great War, 1914-1918, 2nd. ed. (Oxford, 1936), p.351: 'Maxwell... was hampered by Kitchener's instructions.'

Orders were, in fact, issued for a reconnaissance in force to be made on 5 February from Ismailia; unfortunately this never took place because information gained from Turkish prisoners caused General Wilson to believe that 'considerable reinforcements of the enemy were expected and might be at hand.'³⁵ The problem was that the British were convinced Kress would attack again and in greater strength with heavier guns.³⁶ The cause of this miscalculation was due to two factors: firstly, Wilson's staff simply could not accept that the Turks would come such a distance only to try one attack on the Canal; secondly, and more importantly, the French seaplanes which Maxwell relied upon as his only truly reliable source of information as to enemy troop movements suddenly broke down, so that a large concentration at Beersheba went unnoticed.³⁷ The existence of this concentration of enemy troops so far in the rear proved that Kress had not committed his reserves and, therefore, the inevitable conclusion must be that he did not intend to make a second attack; but Sir John knew none of this. The British were further hindered in their attempt to gain accurate information as to the movements of the Turkish forces by a dust storm on the day of the battle and a ridge 12 miles to the east of the Suez Canal that obscured all further observation and allowed Kress to move his men to fresh positions undetected.³⁸ It is not hard to see why Maxwell might have seen the enemy's retreat as a ruse designed to draw his forces out of their prepared positions and into the open before they came face to face with a second attack.³⁹

³⁵ Field Operations No. O.G.18 report by A. Wilson 11 Feb. 1915, W.O. 33/796. The Official History (p.49) incorrectly gives the date for this planned reconnaissance as 6 Feb. 1915.

³⁶ W.D. No.10 Field Company 2nd Q.V.O. Sappers and Miners 4 Feb. 1915, W.O. 95/4410. Diary entry reads: 'The G O C is now acting on the assumption that... the enemy will probably return shortly with heavier guns.'

³⁷ Precis No. A.H. 223/55/G4 5 Feb. 1915, W.O. 95/4360.

³⁸ Maxwell to Kitchener 4 Feb. 1915, W.O. 33/731.

³⁹ P.G. Elgood, Egypt and the army (London, 1924), p.136.

Since the situation was by no means clear and his troops had nothing other than bottles to carry water for operations in the desert he decided 'to take no risks'. ⁴⁰ This, then, would seem to be the extent of the influence of Kitchener's instructions in February 1915; they made an already unpromising situation seem possibly threatening if any rapid offensive action was taken by British forces in the Sinai against an enemy whose size and location could not be accurately calculated. We should not be surprised, consequently, that the Official History exonerates Maxwell of any blame in this affair. ⁴¹

But, unfortunately for Maxwell's reputation as a military commander, this is not the end of the matter by any means. Sir John can be criticized for his choice of officer to command at the Canal. Although officially he was full of praise for General Wilson's conduct in the battle, in private his opinion was somewhat different. ⁴² He seems to have expressed his true feelings on the matter in a letter to Callwell who passed on the information to General Robertson in France: 'Maxwell wrote me privately that with a little more push on the part of the general on the spot, the whole of the Ottoman force which made the attack on the Canal... would have been bagged, or at all events would have lost all its guns and impedimenta.' ⁴³

⁴⁰ Notes by Maxwell on attack on Canal, CAB 45/79.

⁴¹ Official History, p. 49.

⁴² Maxwell to War Office 16 Feb. 1915, W.O. 33/796.

⁴³ Callwell to Robertson 15 Apr. 1915, Robertson papers I/8/20.

Interestingly enough, the possibility of Maxwell intervening rapidly, or even of Wilson making a sudden decision to pursue, may be largely academic, for Turkish artillery fire cut the telegraph and telephone lines on the western bank of the Canal so that communication between Ismailia, the site of Wilson's HQ, and Toussoum was impossible; under such conditions it is hard to believe that the Indian cavalry could have been ordered to move in time.⁴⁷ Perhaps, therefore, much of the cause of the British failure to do more damage to Kress von Kressestein's force in February was due to a faulty command-structure: Maxwell, the senior officer, remained at Cairo while his subordinate was left to fight a battle of vital importance to Egypt; in these circumstances Wilson was hardly likely to take any chances without being sure of his chief's support. In a remarkable way these problems presage the difficulties confronted by General Murray once he began the advance into the Sinai in 1916 and, it could be argued, much of the failure of British military policy in this region up to June 1917 was due to an inability to solve the problem of command: both Maxwell and Murray struggled with the issue and never really found an acceptable solution. We might, therefore, be a little more charitable in our evaluation of General Maxwell's performance in February 1915 and agree with Lord Cromer, who remarked: 'Maxwell is a very good fellow... But his military achievements when the Turks made their attack were certainly not remarkable.'⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Notes on draft chapters by Bingley, CAB 45/78.

⁴⁸ Cromer to Balfour 12 Dec. 1915, WO 79/64.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE BATTLE

In the immediate aftermath of the battle the British appeared to have much to be thankful for. For example, it soon became clear that the Turks had received a 'severer defeat' than was first thought! ⁴⁹ Although the enemy's casualties in the battle itself were not high, their losses incurred through desertion were, and the retreat became chaotic as the expedition struggled back to Syria. ⁵⁰ The incident was a blow to Turkish prestige, moreover, which made things a good deal easier for Maxwell in Egypt.

On the other hand, Kress and his Turkish soldiers did not leave the vicinity of the Canal empty-handed. For one thing, he and his men had proved to the world that they could cross the Sinai and mount a serious attack upon the British positions along the Canal; in London and Egypt, consequently, attention in the future would have to be given to the possibility of a second advance in the Sinai which might be on an even larger scale. ⁵¹ Kress von Kressenstein certainly believed that his expedition increased British anxiety over the security of Egypt and even kept in that country troops who might otherwise have been used elsewhere - especially in France. ⁵²

⁴⁹ Cumberbatch to Said Pasha Shoucair 22 Feb. 1915, CAB 37/126/19.

⁵⁰ Maxwell to Kitchener 7 Feb. 1915, WO 159/13. The Official History (p.50) estimates the Turkish losses at over 2,000.

⁵¹ Grey to McMahon 8 Feb. 1915.

⁵² Kress von Kressenstein, art.cit., p.505.

He was probably correct; for example, at the War Council meeting of 24 February 1915 Kitchener expressed the opinion that another attack upon Egypt should be expected, while Lord Haldane suggested - surely as a result of recent events - that the country ought to become a great 'place d' armes' for British troops. What is more, at the same meeting the Secretary of State for War decided that a brigade of Indian troops he had promised for Mesopotamia could not be spared from Egypt after all. ⁵³ This decision infuriated General Barrow at the India office who believed that 'the situation in the Persian Gulf and India demanded more reinforcements.' ⁵⁴

Perhaps still more worrying for the British - though they did not realise it at the time - was the false impression they seemed to have gained of the Turkish infantry from the battle. In the subsequent reports on the action circulated to the War Council great stress was laid upon the effectiveness of the naval gunfire employed which, it was claimed, 'contributed in no small measure, both morally as well as practically, to the success of these operations.' ⁵⁵ Such arguments seemed to be substantiated by intelligence reports from Syria which stressed the 'very great effect' caused by the shell fire of the ships and field artillery of the Suez Canal Defences amongst the Turkish troops. ⁵⁶

⁵³ War Council meeting 24 Feb. 1915, CAB 42/1/42.

⁵⁴ Barrow to Curzon 22 Feb. 1915, Curzon papers Eur MSS F 112/114a.

⁵⁵ 'Defence of the Suez Canal. Narrative of events 25 Jan. - 8 Feb. 1915.' Mar. 1915, CAB 37/125/15.

⁵⁶ Report from French Admiral, Syrian Coast 28 Apr. 1915, WO 157/690.

In spite of these obvious facts, however, the general opinion amongst the higher ranks of the Force in Egypt after the events of 3 February 1915 was that Indian troops, under British officers, were 'in every way superior to the class of Turkish troops which have so far been brought against them.'⁵⁹ We should not be surprised, as a result, that in London Callwell now believed that the Turks were 'not fighting at all well.'⁶⁰

Since there was already a body of opinion in existence from pre-war days amongst the British military establishment that considered the Turkish army of questionable value the experiences along the Canal appeared to confirm, and, indeed, strengthen such views. Moreover there is strong evidence to suggest that the somewhat misleading experience at the Canal tended to depreciate still further London's opinion of the fighting value of the Turkish army and, consequently, caused the British to underestimate what Ottoman forces might be capable of doing at Gallipoli.⁶¹

⁵⁹ GOC, No.1 Section, Canal Defences to Chief Staff Officer, Canal Defences 25 Mar. 1915, W.O. 95/4360.

⁶⁰ Callwell to Robertson 15 Apr. 1915, Robertson papers I/8/20.

⁶¹ Aspinall-Oglander, Military Operations Gallipoli I (London, 1929), pp. 65 & 135.

CHAPTER 5

EGYPT, GALLIPOLI AND SYRIA: FEBRUARY - AUGUST 1915

'There is always a multitude of reasons both in favour of doing a thing and against doing it. The art of debate lies in presenting them; the art of life lies in neglecting ninety-nine hundredths of them.'

Mark Rutherford

EGYPT AND THE START OF THE GALLIPOLI OPERATIONS

On 20 February 1915 Maxwell was officially informed that a naval squadron had begun to bombard the Turkish ports in the Dardanelles with the intention of trying to force the straits and strike at the Ottoman capital. General Maxwell now found himself ordered to prepare a force of some 30,000 Australian and New Zealand troops should the naval attack require more infantry support than the 2,000 Marines already assigned to the expedition. ¹ Thus the stage was set for Egypt's role in the coming months: supporting the operations at Gallipoli. But this was not exclusively the case, and nor were these months without interest strategically because some attention was again given to the coast of Palestine.

Initially the British in Egypt were enthusiastic about an attempt upon the Dardanelles for it seemed to them that such an operation would draw enemy troops away from the Canal and so make another attack on the country in the east less likely. ² Those with a nose for the political atmosphere in Egypt could also smell the benefits of a success at the Dardanelles which would impress the Egyptian population to the extent that they might not cause any trouble in the future. ³ Unfortunately, those hopes were to be dashed.

¹ Official History, pp. 54-55.

² Clayton to Wingate 3 Mar. 1915, Wingate papers 134/3/1.

³ McMahon to Nicolson 8 Mar. 1915, FO 800/377.

The failure of a full naval assault at the Dardanelles on 18 March 1915 convinced General Hamilton, the commander of the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force, which had been formed for action at Gallipoli, that a major amphibious assault was going to be needed if these straits were ever to be forced. The consequences of this decision proved monumental for Maxwell and his officers, for it soon became apparent that Egypt would now act as the main base for these troops, and by the end of March the MEF began to land in the country.

Egypt simply was not equipped to cope with this fresh influx of troops, especially since everything had to be done so rapidly. Many of the units of the MEF needed to be disembarked in the country and then re-embarked in preparation for the coming landings almost immediately. Inevitably chaos ensued at Alexandria as one officer admitted: 'There have been several cases of over-carriage of stores destined for Egypt both from England and India, though considering the situation of Egypt this is not to be wondered at.' ⁴ Problems like these were often caused by the fact that many ships' officers did not know who, or indeed what, was actually on board their ships. But matters were made still worse by the subsequent over-crowding of the harbour at Alexandria which meant embarkation dates were often delayed while the troops themselves even missed their rations. ⁵ However, probably the worst chaos of all was caused by the War Office itself when it decided to change its orders or when those orders never reached the units concerned; for example, because of confusion of this very kind, some Australian troops left Egypt without their ammunition. ⁶

In reality, Egypt was far from ideal as a military base. The country offered all the traditional temptations to which the soldier

⁴ 'Sea Transport' by Quartermaster General, Ismailia, 29 March 1915, W.O. 95/4417.

⁵ W.D. G. Branch. Army HQ Egypt. 6-7 Apr. 1915, W.O. 95/4360.

⁶ Ibid., 1 May 1915. The East Lancashire Division's transport was left in Egypt because of a sudden change in orders.

usually succumbs: alcohol was freely available and often appeared to be drugged, and prostitutes abounded, which caused some to demand more energetic action from the authorities who did not appear to be taking these problems seriously enough. Moreover, the 'strangeness' of Egypt seemed to fascinate the troops and made them much harder to control. ⁷ The Australian troops were particularly guilty when it came to street disturbances and it was not uncommon for the Force in Egypt's HQ to record the following when reporting such incidents, 'Australians chiefly implicated'. ⁸

Nor was the Egyptian climate ideal for good training. Poor roads in a hot and dusty country sapped the morale of the soldiers who had to march from their ships. These conditions were not appreciated by the lower ranks and they were quite ready to let their officers know what they thought: 'The cream of the British Army is getting bloody well curdled' was one comment picked up by General Marshall, for example. ⁹ Marching in heat was, in fact, the least of the problems, for there was always the fear of disease, a fear that was a constant source of anxiety to Maxwell, who was only too aware of the feeble nature of his Indian troops who seemed to become infected by some illness or other on a regular basis. ¹⁰

⁷ G. Thornton, With the Anzacs in Cairo: the tale of a great fight (London, 1918) pp. 66 and 105. D. Doull, With the Anzacs in Egypt (Sydney, 1916) p. 22.

⁸ 2 Apr. 1915, W.O. 95/4360. See also W.D. Deputy Assistant Adjutant General Suez Canal Defences 18 Feb. 1915, W.O. 95/4417. New Zealand troops could cause trouble, so, as on this day when they became involved in an affray on the Canal at El Kubri. For more details on this subject generally see K. Fewster, 'The Wazza riots, 1915', Journal of the Australian War Memorial, IV (1984) pp. 47-53.

⁹ W. Marshall, Memories of four fronts (London, 1929), p. 51.

¹⁰ GOC Army of Occupation Egypt to C in C India 6 May 1915, L/MIL/17/5/3900.

TENSION BETWEEN MAXWELL AND HAMILTON

On 24 April 1915 the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force launched itself in an amphibious assault upon the Gallipoli Peninsula. Meanwhile, in Egypt the facilities for supporting the MEF had started to take on a degree of permanence. Brigadier-General McGrigor was made commander of the MEF's own base in the country; but this decision in itself was not likely to lead to successful co-operation with the Force in Egypt. This was largely due to the possible confusion likely to be caused by such a scheme, since McGrigor naturally received his orders from Hamilton and yet his command was situated in a country under the jurisdiction of Maxwell. McGrigor himself later admitted that it was a 'curious arrangement' and yet it worked 'extraordinarily well' because of all the help given to him by Maxwell.¹¹ Remarkably, therefore, this became an example of a most poorly-designed scheme of command that was made to work by the good-will of the officers involved, a most unusual occurrence in the history of British military policy in Egypt, as we shall discover as our account continues.

Although McGrigor and Maxwell co-operated successfully, the same cannot be said for Hamilton and Maxwell. Their failure was probably largely due to the divergence in their respective objectives: Sir John was always aware of the need to maintain the security of Egypt, while the Commander in Chief of the MEF saw any move in this direction involving the retention of troops in Egypt as an action that would deprive him of much-needed reinforcements at Gallipoli. Officially, of course, there is little evidence of the stormy relationship that developed between the two men. The Official History, for example, talks only of the 'valuable assistance proffered by Maxwell in so many directions' on behalf of the

¹¹ McGrigor to MacMunn 3 Aug. 1924, CAB 45/79. The Official History (pp. 56-57) overlooks the personal aspect behind the success of this scheme.

MEF. ¹² In fact, even in the private correspondence between the two generals, Hamilton often praised Maxwell for his support, even though he was plainly frustrated by the latter's attitude. ¹³

One of the most important issues that helped to sour the relationship between these two men was the number of troops in Egypt. As early as 25 March Hamilton actually described Egypt as 'stiff' with troops and asked for some more of them to assist his operations. ¹⁴ Moreover, throughout his time in command of the MEF he found himself having to remind Sir John that all available evidence suggested the Turks had moved most of their troops to the Dardanelles so that he need not be too concerned about the defence of Egypt. ¹⁵ In the end, Hamilton became embittered towards Maxwell because of the lack of support that he believed had been forthcoming from Egypt for his operations. Writing in 1917 he argued that if one extra Indian brigade then in Egypt had been made available for the first landings at Gallipoli then these might have succeeded, but as this unit had not been despatched until too late these attacks failed. ¹⁶ After the war Sir Ian accused Maxwell of having 'played all he knew on Kitchener's weak point, his love of Egypt' so that he could keep troops from Gallipoli and in Egypt. ¹⁷ This second charge can be substantiated to a certain extent, for Maxwell did admit after the war that his task in Egypt was made much easier by Kitchener upon whom he knew he could always rely for adequate troops to defend the country. ¹⁸ Hamilton even became convinced, what is more, that the Secretary of State for War deliberately treated Maxwell and himself as equals in order that his own influence upon the conduct of the operations in the region was not in

¹² Official History, p. 116.

¹³ See, for example, Hamilton to Maxwell 23 May 1915, Hamilton papers 5/12.

¹⁴ Hamilton to Kitchener 29 Mar. 1915, Hamilton papers 5/1.

¹⁵ Hamilton to Maxwell 8 June 1915, Hamilton papers 5/12.

¹⁶ Hamilton to Nevinson 14 Aug. 1917, Hamilton papers 32/1/2.

¹⁷ Hamilton to Churchill 8 Feb. 1922, Hamilton papers 1/15.

¹⁸ Notes by Maxwell on draft chapters of Official History, CAB 45/79.

any way diminished: 'Kitchener liked to run the show himself and for that reason kept Maxwell and myself equal on purpose so that things must be referred to him'. ¹⁹ A comment such as this may help to explain why Kitchener was so enthusiastic at the end of 1915 for a system of dual-command to be adopted in Egypt even though most of his military advisers were adamantly opposed to the plan.

To be fair to both Maxwell and Kitchener the issue did not seem quite so clear-cut from their perspective. For one thing, it was not easy to push troops to Gallipoli because of the chaos in the Egyptian ports. Moreover, once the transport ships had left Alexandria, Maxwell had no idea who was responsible for them or their safety until they reached Hamilton's command! ²⁰ Nor was Hamilton aware of the major problems that faced Sir John in Egypt.

While the MEF struggled at Gallipoli, the military authorities in Egypt were concerned about the lack of men available early in May to patrol the west bank of the Suez Canal. This was a very real problem, for only with adequate patrolling could the small Turkish raiding parties, armed with mines and seeking to block the Canal, be stopped, and it was no small task since the length of the front at the Canal was some 87 miles. ²¹ As a result, once Hamilton's demands for troops increased in both their regularity and intensity Maxwell began to show his frustration, as is apparent in a letter of 4 July 1915: 'You have bled me to the very limit of safety, and I have no margin left for ordinary casualties'. ²² In fact, by the end of the same month, Sir John was actually being ordered to give up his last formation of British troops in Egypt. ²³

¹⁹ Hamilton to Churchill 28 June 1923, Hamilton papers 1/15.

²⁰ Maxwell to Hamilton 2 June 1915, Hamilton papers 5/12.

²¹ Maj.-Gen. Wilson to G.S. Army HQ 1 May 1915, W.O. 95/4360.

²² Maxwell to Hamilton 4 July 1915, Hamilton papers 5/12.

²³ Official History, p. 59.

But Maxwell's difficulties were not purely military. The eyes of the world seemed to be upon the events at Gallipoli and a defeat, or indeed any failure, there might cause the population of Egypt to reconsider their loyalties, or at least so argued many in London and Cairo. This explains why Kitchener flew into such a rage and claimed that there would be a possible revolt in Egypt when he learnt that the largest battleship at the Dardanelles, HMS 'Elizabeth', was to be withdrawn. ²⁴ Meanwhile, the lack of any substantial reports reaching Egypt as to the progress of operations on Gallipoli caused McMahon some anxiety, for it appeared as if defeats were being concealed. ²⁵ Egypt, therefore, started to issue its own communiqués about events at Gallipoli in order to quell any such thoughts. Unfortunately for Hamilton, however, these tended to be more optimistic than events at the peninsula really merited, with the result that he became concerned that his own credibility with the MEF would consequently suffer. ²⁶

Maxwell also had other anxieties. In May and June he received reports that trouble could be expected from Sayed Ahmed, the Senussi, to the west who had received German agents. ²⁷ As it turned out there was no trouble with the Senussi for the present, but Sir John remained most concerned about the leader and told Kitchener so: 'I am most concerned about the Senussi... There is no doubt that if he declared against us, we would have an infinity of trouble, and no one can foresee where it would end.' ²⁸ Moreover, problems in the Sudan had also arisen and, although Sir Reginald Wingate, the Sirdar, dealt with them most ably, Maxwell had promised to send any troops if needed. Finally, in June he lost the 28th Indian Brigade because the Indian Government wanted to send an expedition against Sheikh Said, 100 miles west of Aden.

²⁴ War Council meeting 14 May 1915, CAB 42/2/19.

²⁵ McMahon to Grey 10 May 1915, FO 800/48.

²⁶ Hamilton to Maxwell 20 June 1915, Hamilton papers 5/12.

²⁷ 9 and 10 May 1915, W.O. 95/4360.

²⁸ Maxwell to Kitchener 24 June 1915, PRO 30/57/47.

EVENTS ON EGYPT'S EASTERN FRONTIER

A serious problem for Maxwell caused by the Gallipoli operations was the removal of the naval seaplanes at Port Said by the Admiralty.²⁹ These planes had been the eyes of the Force in Egypt since they had enabled Sir John to observe enemy troop movements in the Sinai and Syria. Although Maxwell did manage to get some more efficient seaplanes from the French in April there nonetheless was a period of 'blindness' for Cairo as to Turkish troop movements in March 1915.³⁰

Maxwell had expected another enemy attack after the one in February and his lack of accurate information now made him still more cautious. Moreover, early in April he began to receive reports that suggested another attack was contemplated by the enemy.³¹ Unfortunately such information was quite incorrect for, as Hamilton consistently argued, the Turks had begun moving their men north to mass at the Dardanelles and no serious attack was intended on the Canal at all. According to the Military Intelligence Office at Cairo the enemy sought to frighten the British with 'sham attacks' and 'by rumours of great things impending'. It followed, therefore, that the evidence collected so far of a coming attack was all part of a Turkish 'bluff' designed to keep as many British troops in Egypt as possible.³² Since Djemal Pasha now only had about 15,000 troops in Syria the best way for him to execute such a policy was simply to place small units in the Sinai at new positions which were soon noticed by the British and so give the impression that fresh troops had entered the desert.³³

²⁹ Maxwell to Vice-Admiral Egyptian Waters 13 Mar. 1915, W.O. 95/4360.

³⁰ Arthur, p. 179.

³¹ Intelligence report 8 Apr. 1915, W.O. 95/4360.

³² Notes on Turkish formations by Military Intelligence Office, Cairo 4 May 1915, W.O. 157/691.

³³ Crewe to Sir F. Bertie 3 July 1915, FO 371/2477/91609. For examples of new enemy posts discovered in the Sinai see 22 June 1915, W.O. 95/4360.

In fact, as operations continued at Gallipoli and the drain on both sides increased there, Djemal found himself having to enlist 'larger numbers of Arab tribesmen... to carry on patrolling and communication' work in the Sinai because of his own shortage of men. ³⁴

But the Force in Egypt was not wedded to a purely passive defence of the Canal. On the contrary, its officers were drawn to more offensive action in the Sinai by the very Arab tribesmen whom the Turks had started to enlist. For example, it was known that the Bedouin of the Sinai all went to El Arish to buy and sell food, with the result that the enemy gained the benefit of these men's inside knowledge of the peninsula. Consequently it was suggested that a grain store and bazaar might be built outside Qantara to attract these nomads so that the British could gain their friendship and glean all of their expert knowledge of the desert themselves. ³⁵

At GHQ in Cairo, moreover, there were those who were not satisfied with merely enticing Arabs to the Canal. In a paper addressed to Maxwell and dated 18 March 1915 the following objective of the Force in Egypt was plainly stated: 'It has now become a question whether we cannot pursue a somewhat more active policy in our conduct of operations on the East bank of the Canal.' ³⁶ The reason for wanting to adopt a more active policy was two-fold: firstly, it was believed this would 'give confidence to those Arabs who have remained friendly to us'; secondly, such a policy would prevent aggressive patrolling by the enemy in the Sinai. In order to execute this objective it was argued that a camel force was needed to patrol the area east of the Canal and a landing ground would be required so that planes could watch the tracks in the region. That both these suggestions could best be facilitated

³⁴ 26 July 1915, W.O. 95/4360.

³⁵ G O C 29 Brigade to C G S Canal Defences 5 Mar. 1915, W.O. 95/4360.

³⁶ Secret GS/10 A/15 18 Mar. 1915, addressed to Maxwell, W.O. 95/4360.

only by a permanent base in the Sinai was the inevitable conclusion.³⁷ Although nothing came of these suggestions for the present due to the demands of the Gallipoli operations which denuded Maxwell of the necessary troops needed for offensive action, they nonetheless demonstrate that officers in Egypt wanted to move into the Sinai even as early as March 1915.

Meanwhile events in the Sinai during the period from March to August 1915 largely consisted in the Turks making a number of raids, of various sizes, against the Canal and the British responding with the necessary counter-measures. On 23 March 1915 the enemy advanced with a force of 400 men to just north of El Kubri (in the southern section of the Suez Canal). In fact, this was only part of a force of 800 infantry, 1,200 cavalry and some guns encamped 8 miles east of the Canal. Moreover, at the time the situation seemed more disquieting than it actually was, since there was also a Turkish force at Nekhl in the Sinai and it seemed as if these moves could be the preliminaries to a major assault. A force was despatched to catch the enemy troops who had appeared at El Kubri but this was unable to move fast enough to cut off their retreat.³⁸

The most important result of this little action was that the British, once again, failed to catch a retreating force in the Sinai even though they despatched a force to do just this. The same thing happened again on 28 April 1915; a force of about 300 Turks and Bedouins was sighted east of Ismailia Ferry Port but, in spite of good aerial reconnaissance and a mobile column, it slipped away. Although these experiences were frustrating, they were not entirely wasted for the British were starting to learn about operating in the Sinai desert. For one thing, their experience of marching in the desert convinced some officers that infantry would have to be nursed in such an environment if

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Official History, pp. 61-63. 22-23 Mar. 1915, W.O. 95/4360.

they were expected to be 'fighting fit' on reaching the enemy's positions. One officer estimated that his men could not march more than two miles an hour in the desert, while another argued that his troops could not cover more than four miles on the same day if an attack was to be carried out 'with any prospect of success'. ³⁹ The British were starting to learn just how much of a problem the Sinai Peninsula was going to be for their troops if they ever attempted serious offensive operations in the region.

As we have already seen, the Turks did attempt a series of very small raids against the Canal in this period which were extremely difficult to counter. What is more, one tactic adopted by the enemy was to combine a small raid with the movement of a larger force in the Sinai designed to distract the British and so facilitate the laying of mines in the Canal by the smaller unit. ⁴⁰ Thanks to these methods Djemal's men actually succeeded in blocking the Canal for a brief period when a liner hit one of these mines on 30 June 1915. ⁴¹ This was all very embarrassing for General Maxwell, since it was one of his briefs to keep the Canal open and free from enemy interference. In order to counter these tactics by the enemy the Force in Egypt adopted some remarkable expedients: for example, one method attempted was actually to leave any mines located in place in the hope that the Turks would return to them! ⁴²

Although Maxwell lost the use of most of the warships that had so nobly assisted him in February to the Dardanelles, there nonetheless remained some vessels available to bombard enemy positions. French

³⁹ Col. F.A. Smith to G.S.O. Canal Defences 9 July 1915 and 'comments on movements on 6,7 and 8 July 1915' by Lt.-Col. R.B. Low, W.O. 95/4360.

⁴⁰ 10 Apr. 1915, W.O. 95/4360: 'The movement of the cavalry towards Qantara had evidently been made to divert attention from the operations of the mine party.'

⁴¹ Official History, p. 64.

⁴² 31 May - 1 June 1915, W.O. 95/4360.

ships shelled El Arish on 16 April 1915 and according to subsequent reports the enemy suffered 'heavy losses of material' in consequence. This was followed by a similar bombardment of Gaza on the very next day. In the same month, moreover, British planes bombed Turkish positions in the Sinai as if to emphasise that Maxwell was not entirely satisfied with a purely defensive attitude on the part of his forces. ⁴³ Unfortunately McMahon was none too happy about this offensive action by the French, for he feared it demonstrated a desire by Paris to press her political claims to Syria rather than any intention of any serious military action in the future. ⁴⁴

PLANNING TO STRIKE ON THE COAST OF SYRIA

The decision to strike at the Dardanelles indirectly drew more attention than ever to the coastline of Syria. The reason for this was fairly straightforward: once London had decided to strike in the eastern Mediterranean it had to consider what territorial demands it would make if the expedition was successful and the Ottoman Empire was defeated, because it was obvious that her allies, France and Russia, were certain to make sweeping claims. ⁴⁵ The War Council therefore set up a committee to draw up what ought to be British desiderata in the Middle East and it issued its report on 30 June 1915, entitled 'Asiatic Turkey. Report of a Committee'. ⁴⁶ Upon this committee sat two men who had an important role to play in British strategy - Hankey and Callwell.

The initiation of this committee naturally created a great deal of speculation and various departments and individuals started to outline

⁴³ 16-17 Apr. 1915, W.O. 95/4360. Intelligence Bulletin 16 Apr. 1915, W.O. 157/690.

⁴⁴ Sir H. McMahon to Foreign Office 16 Mar. 1915, FO 371/2484/30729.

⁴⁵ War Council meeting 10 Mar. 1915, CAB 42/2/5. For full details see A. S. Klieman, 'British war aims in the Middle East in 1915', Journal of Contemporary History, III (1968), pp. 237-251.

⁴⁶ 'Asiatic Turkey. Report of a Committee' 30 June 1915, CAB 42/3/12.

what they thought ought to be Britain's territorial desiderata in the Near East. The Admiralty, for instance, considered it of vital importance to have a naval base at Alexandretta after the war to counter possible Russian influence in the Mediterranean. ⁴⁷ Kitchener also entered the fray. He, too, advocated Alexandretta as a British possession and his vision of a post-war defensive scheme for Egypt based upon the Sinai, with a position on the Syrian coast, bore a striking similarity to the C.I.D. plans of 1909. ⁴⁸ Churchill even quoted a German Admiral, Suchow, on 10 March 1915 who had claimed that Germany 'would have gone to war in order to secure Alexandretta alone'. ⁴⁹ Meanwhile, Hankey, who had 'decided to remain neutral' about the importance of the town, produced a factual memorandum upon it and its possible conversion to a naval base. ⁵⁰

However, there was an alternative offered to Alexandretta in these discussions - Haifa. This town had advantages over Alexandretta: it was less likely to cause a clash with French interests in the region and was not so much of a dangerous out-post since it was closer to Egypt. Herbert Samuel and General Barrow both supported the annexation of Haifa or Acre and Lloyd George also showed a preference for Palestine over Alexandretta. ⁵¹

This debate in London that continued from March until the committee reported at the end of June naturally helped to keep Alexandretta and

⁴⁷ 'Alexandretta and Mesopotamia' by Admiralty 17 Mar. 1915, CAB 42/2/11. 'Alexandretta: its importance as a future base', by Admiral Sir H.B. Jackson 18 Mar. 1915, CAB 42/2/13.

⁴⁸ 'Alexandretta and Mesopotamia' by Kitchener 16 Mar. 1915, CAB 42/2/10.

⁴⁹ War Council meeting 10 Mar. 1915, op. cit.

⁵⁰ Hankey Diary 16 and 17 Mar. 1915, HNKY 1/1. 'Alexandretta'. Note by Secretary 17 Mar. 1915, CAB 42/2/12.

⁵¹ 'Palestine' by H. Samuel Mar. 1915, CAB 37/126/1. 'The future settlement of Eastern Turkey in Asia and Arabia' by A. Hirtzel, 14 Mar. 1915. Note by General Barrow 16 Mar. 1915, CAB 42/2/8. War Council meeting 10 Mar. 1915, op. cit.

Haifa in the minds of the members of the War Council and the men of the War Office and Admiralty, even though the operations at Gallipoli continued to demand more and more attention as they intensified and did not produce the immediate success that they had seemed to offer. Moreover, even the military questions raised by the actions of the MEF tended to focus attention on the Syrian coast, for if these had not been totally successful then the possibility had to be raised that perhaps further action elsewhere might assist them more effectively than additional attacks on the peninsula.

Initially there had been talk of using the Alexandretta or Haifa options as a feint to disguise the move on Gallipoli. For example, Hankey felt that the first moves of the operations at the Dardanelles should have been handled in this way:

While the bombardment was commencing the transports ought to have appeared at some entirely different point on the Turkish coast, such as Alexandretta or Haifa... Then the troops ought to have come in as a bolt from the blue. ⁵²

In fact, Hankey had even gone one step further than this: he had actually suggested that the MEF might have been embarked and then re-embarked at Alexandretta or Haifa, all as part of an elaborate feint. ⁵³

Because he had not been happy with the way in which the early moves of the Dardanelles attack had been executed, Hankey started to get cold feet about the entire affair. He therefore tried to influence Admiral Fisher, the First Sea Lord, to change the destination of the MEF so that it would go to Haifa, from where Damascus could be captured and the Turkish army in Syria destroyed. ⁵⁴ Fisher was impressed by this scheme

⁵² Hankey to Esher 15 Mar. 1915, Hankey papers 4/7.

⁵³ Hankey to Crewe 19 May 1915, CAB 63/5.

⁵⁴ M. Gilbert, Winston Spencer Churchill, III (London, 1971), p. 389. Captain Richmond to Fisher 8 Apr. 1915. Hankey persuaded Richmond to write to Fisher.

and suggested it to Churchill, who promptly rejected it. According to Hankey the War Office were unwilling to consider the proposal because it would take a very long time to collect sufficient land transport necessary for such an operation, while it was assumed that far less transport ought to be required for a landing at Gallipoli. ⁵⁵

Fisher and Hankey did not give up, even after the first landings had been made, however. Fisher was after Churchill's job and he let it be known that if he became the next First Lord of the Admiralty he would evacuate Gallipoli and move the troops to Haifa. ⁵⁶ While Hankey himself was only too aware of all the logistical problems entailed in moving entrenched troops at Gallipoli to the coast of Palestine, he felt it was a risk worth taking: 'I have constantly kept in mind the possibility of transferring the Gallipoli Force to Haifa. I am sure if Hindenburg were in Kitchener's place he would do it.' ⁵⁷ Whether or not Hindenburg would have taken the gamble we shall never know; but it was certainly a risk. Apart from all the problems which the British would face in executing such an operation, the Turks had not been entirely idle. As early as 1 April 1915 Cairo had identified a troop concentration at Haifa which they could only explain in terms of enemy anxiety over a possible Allied landing there. ⁵⁸ Still worse was to follow, however; French naval reconnaissance of the Syrian coast revealed that the Turks had fortified Jaffa, Haifa and Beirut so that 'if an Expedition is going to be made in... Syria one must not leave them [the Turks] time to organise, otherwise large forces will have to be sent where a small force would have been sufficient a little earlier.' ⁵⁹ The opportunity for a landing at Haifa seemed to be slipping away; but it should be made clear that these Turkish defences in Syria were nothing compared to those now organised along the

⁵⁵ Hankey to Crewe 19 May 1915, op. cit.

⁵⁶ Gilbert, III, p. 452. Fisher to Crewe 18 May 1915.

⁵⁷ Hankey to Crewe 19 May 1915. op. cit.

⁵⁸ Intelligence Bulletin. 'Present position of Turkish forces.' 1 Apr. 1915, W.O. 157/690.

⁵⁹ Intelligence Summary 28 Apr. 1915, W.O. 157/690.

Dardanelles. Moreover, other information also suggested that the Turks had their eyes very much on the Alexandretta area and feared an attack there. ⁶⁰ Nonetheless, Cairo still appeared to believe that both Haifa and Alexandretta were the 'only two ports worth considering' on the Syrian coast. ⁶¹ Nor were Haifa and Alexandretta the only positions along the Syrian coast considered for amphibious operations while the Gallipoli operations were in progress. In Cairo, for instance, plans were outlined for a landing at Ladakiya (south of Alexandretta) which, it was hoped, would come as an 'entire surprise' to the enemy. The theory was that since the coastal defences there were so weak a force of two mounted divisions and one infantry division could threaten Aleppo, Hama and places as far as 90 miles inland. Thus, Turkish forces from the Caucasus and the Dardanelles would have to be diverted to meet the new threat, while enemy forces in Palestine could be expected to withdraw so 'enabling the Canal Defence force to move forward without difficulty and thus relieve altogether the particularly annoying species of warfare now going on there. ⁶²

The French, too, were starting to look beyond Gallipoli. Early in May, for instance, the British learnt that two French admirals were compiling a report advocating the transfer of 30,000 men from the Dardanelles to Ayas Bay in the region of Alexandretta. They seemed to be hoping for a joint expedition with the British and saw the aim of the scheme to 'cut all communications and so immobilise Turkish forces'. ⁶³

As stalemate continued at the Dardanelles so Hankey, at least, saw the need to prepare in detail 'some alternative offensive operation' if complete success was not achieved there. His favourite option remained

⁶⁰ Daily Intelligence Bulletin by T.E. Lawrence, 3 June 1915, W.O. 157/692.

⁶¹ Special Reports by Intelligence Office, Cairo 1914-1915. Memorandum on railways in Syria and Mesopotamia, W.O. 157/689.

⁶² Ibid. Paper on possible expedition to Syria, no date, but probably the summer of 1915.

⁶³ Wooley to Newcombe 4 May 1915, Clayton papers 693/9/2.

an attack in Syria since the Turkish forces had largely recoiled upon Constantinople and Allied forces in the Levant were, he believed, large enough to occupy Damascus and 'cut off' the whole of Syria and Arabia.

⁶⁴

These arguments continued to be pressed as the months passed. Some began to talk of enormous forces being landed in Asia Minor to support the troops at Gallipoli; this could be done only by bringing large numbers of fresh men from England and reserves from France and Italy, and the hope was that such a move would so shock the Turks that they would capitulate 'without even waiting for the final deathblow'. ⁶⁵ At the end of August, however, Hankey, after a visit to the Gallipoli position, wrote a memorandum in which he suggested a possible alternative to a withdrawal:

An attractive alternative would be to make a dash into Syria, to capture Damascus, cut the Hejaz railway, and occupy Syria. The Powers which had conquered both Bagdad and Damascus would hardly be without prestige in the East even if they had failed to take Constantinople itself. ⁶⁶

Hankey saw the seizure of Damascus as a way of maintaining British prestige in the East, therefore, if Gallipoli had to be evacuated. Moreover, according to Cairo there were less than 3,000 men at this city and it was only used anyway as a training camp. ⁶⁷ Henry Wilson got to hear of these suggestions of Hankey but he confided to his diary that since Hamilton was not in favour of them nothing would come of them. ⁶⁸ He was correct.

⁶⁴ Paper by Hankey 16 June 1915, CAB 63/5.

⁶⁵ 'The critical urgency of the Turkish Campaign' by C. E. Heathcote-Smith, 24 Aug. 1915, CAB 63/9.

⁶⁶ 'The Dardanelles. Memorandum on the situation. 30 Aug. 1915.' by Hankey, CAB 42/3/19.

⁶⁷ 'The Turkish Army in Syria and Sinai. Movements of Troops', Aug. 1915, W.O. 157/694.

⁶⁸ Henry Wilson Diary 1 Sep. 1915.

One reason for Hankey's optimism about offensive action in Syria was his belief that there was 'at no time much enthusiasm for Turkey in Syria'. ⁶⁹ That the Turks were not popular in Syria had not been lost on the British and as they formulated subsidiary operations or alternatives to the Dardanelles they hoped for the support of the indigenous population. And the information they received about the Syrian peoples was most encouraging. Towards the end of April Egypt started to obtain reports of Turkish troops being assigned to watch the Druse tribesmen of the Hauran, and of the Turks even being 'somewhat afraid' of them. ⁷⁰ Moreover, the common opinion was that the Druse were 'comparatively well armed' and would side with Christian forces 'if the Allies would help'. ⁷¹

Then there were the Armenians. In April the Russians informed the British that the Armenians offered to send 1,000 men via Canada to co-operate in any operations in Cilicia undertaken by the Allies. The offer was politely declined; but this was not the end of the story. ⁷²

In July an Armenian committee handed General Maxwell a note saying a volunteer drive had started in the United States to recruit men for a force to be formed at Cyprus with the intention of landing small units on the coast of Cilicia to paralyse Turkish communications. The Armenians said they could gather up to 10,000 men at Cyprus; but they would need arms, transport and perhaps a small Allied force as well. Foreign Office reaction to this proposal was a good deal more favourable: 'The scheme proposed... is not over ambitious and might be

⁶⁹ Paper by Hankey 16 June 1915, op. cit.

⁷⁰ Intelligence bulletin 26 Apr. 1915 and Intelligence summary 27 Apr. 1915, W.O. 157/690.

⁷¹ 'The Druse of Lebanon' by Joseph O. Salawach, no date, W.O. 157/689.

⁷² Sir C. Spring Rice to F.O. 24 Apr. 1915, FO 371/2485/49616 and F.O. to Spring Rice 29 Apr. 1915, FO 371/2485/51438.

successful, if only in creating a diversion'. ⁷³ Others, too, saw the advantages of landing trained Armenian irregulars behind enemy lines and considered that the damage they might do could have some influence upon the Dardanelles if matters there reached a crisis point. ⁷⁴ Unfortunately there were political complications with all of this for the Egyptian authorities were none too happy about training the Armenians in Egypt because of its possible impact upon Muslim feeling in the country. ⁷⁵ But the idea continued to be raised. Mark Sykes raised the subject with Maxwell while the former was in Egypt and it now became clear that all the Armenians wanted was to be armed and trained in Cyprus and then landed in the Cilicia region so they could then create disorder amongst the Turkish communications to Syria. ⁷⁶ Maxwell seemed keen about this though he was only thinking in terms of small raiding groups of Armenians. ⁷⁷ Meanwhile, reports had reached Cairo that there were disturbances among the Armenians in Cilicia; unfortunately, when a French admiral rescued some of these people and brought them to Egypt they did not make a very good impression, for they seemed to do very little except remain dirty! ⁷⁸

⁷³ McMahon to Grey 27 July 1915 and F.O. minute 5 Aug. 1915, F.O. 371/2485/106769.

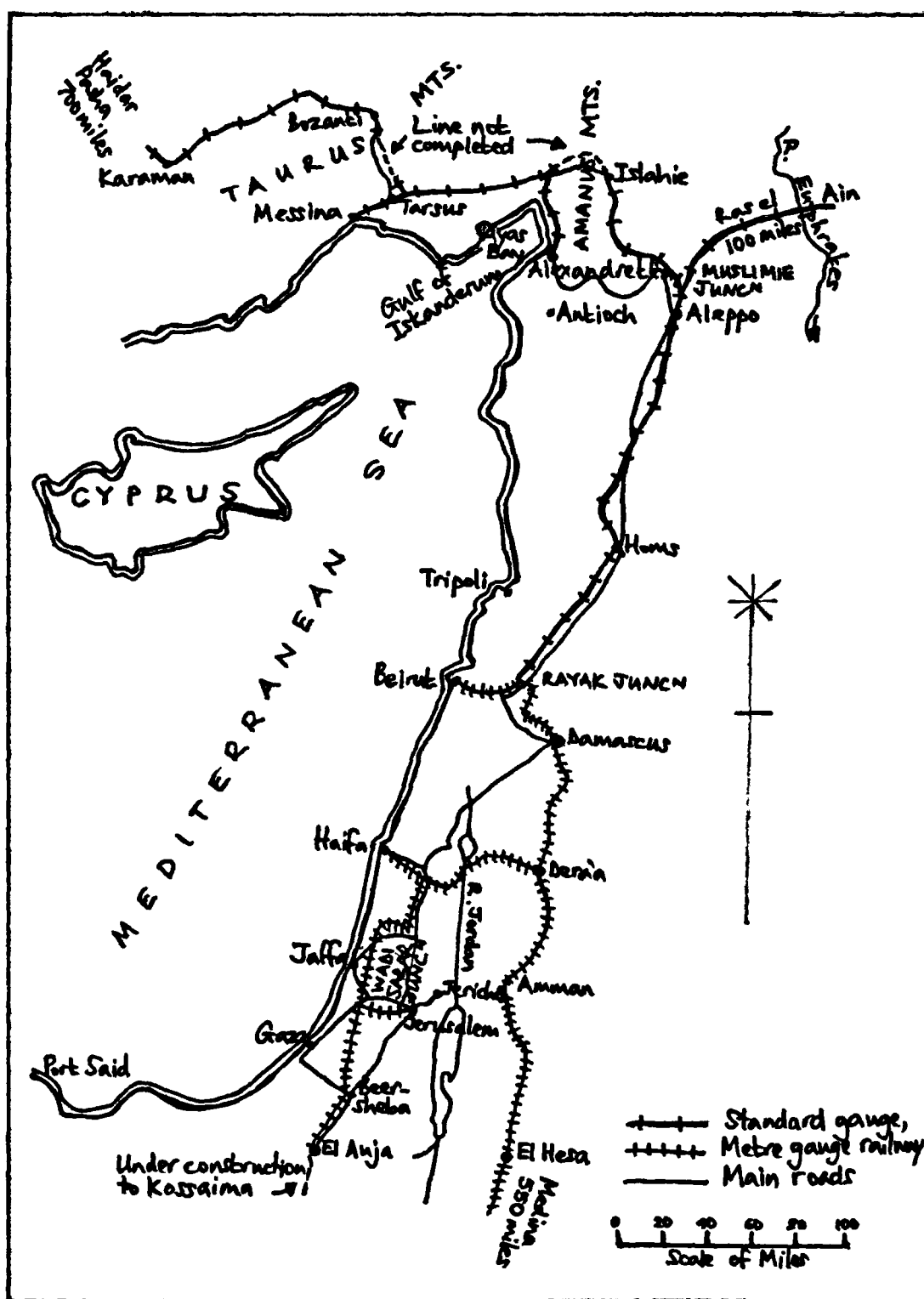
⁷⁴ R. Adelson, Mark Sykes: portrait of an amateur (London, 1975), p. 189.

⁷⁵ A. Nassibian, Britain and the Armenian question, 1915-1923 (London, 1984), p. 92.

⁷⁶ Sykes to Maxwell 3 Aug. 1915, F.O. 371/2485/11586.

⁷⁷ Arthur, pp. 218-9. Maxwell to Kitchener 27 Sep. 1915.

⁷⁸ Intelligence Summary. The Armenian rising in Jebel Musa. 14 Sep. 1915, W.O. 157/695. Official History, p. 86: 'The Armenians have virtues, but... most of the refugees were lazy, dirty, insubordinate and disinclined to undertake any enterprise in the cause of their hosts.'



MAP No. 2: TURKISH COMMUNICATIONS AND THE COAST OF SYRIA

CHAPTER 6

THE EVACUATION OF THE DARDANELLES AND FEAR OF

A FRESH ATTACK UPON EGYPT: SEPTEMBER - DECEMBER 1915

'Then he got some sheets of paper and drew me a plan of the dispositions of the Turkish forces... The troops released from Gallipoli wanted a lot of refitment, and would be slow in reaching the Transcaucasian frontier, where the Russians were threatening. The Army of Syria was pretty nearly a rabble under the lunatic Djemal. There wasn't the foggiest chance of a serious invasion of Egypt being undertaken.'

John Buchan, Greenmantle

GALLIPOLI INCREASES THE STRAIN UPON MAXWELL

Although the Suvla Bay landing had not succeeded the Gallipoli campaign was to drag on until December and it continued to dictate affairs in Egypt throughout this period. On 11 August 1915, for example, Kitchener asked Maxwell if the latter could not find more men for Hamilton from Egypt. Though Maxwell was prepared to do all he could he started to protest when the War Office offered the MEF part of the 28th Indian Brigade.¹ His reasons for objecting to the loss of still more of his garrison were the demands made upon his men in their defence of the Suez Canal.² Indeed, so concerned was the general by the number of troops he had given up to the MEF that he told Lord Kitchener he and his men were living on a bluff in Egypt.³ Nor were Maxwell's limited number of troops in especially good condition. His Indian troops were in a particularly bad way and in August he complained to India that although some of their men

1 Official History, pp.59-70.

2 Maxwell to Hamilton 24 Sept. 1915, Hamilton papers 5/12.

3 Arthur, pp.210-219; Maxwell to Kitchener 27 Sept. 1915.

had been in Egypt for nearly eight months they had yet to receive a complete set of new boots! Meanwhile, he also found himself having to ask India for more medical personnel for other Indian units.⁴

In fact Gallipoli was beginning to create an unbearable strain upon the Egyptian authorities; the problem was not so much the material demands of the campaign - though these were onerous enough - as the damage being done to British prestige in the minds of the population. McMahon feared that the failure at Suvla could seriously influence the people even though much of the truth was concealed and little information leaked out, since, with the regular arrival of wounded at Alexandria from the Peninsula, it was clear to even the most uninformed observer that all was not going well for Hamilton's men.⁵ Merely finding suitable accommodation for the wounded caused Maxwell a serious headache; hotels had to be used to reduce the burden upon existing facilities.⁶ But the real problem caused by these wounded men lay in the stories they spread about conditions at Gallipoli and the defeats inflicted on the MEF. Moreover, their lenient treatment by the Egyptian medical personnel engendered bitter feeling amongst the MEF - many of whom had to fight on, though in a worse condition than men in Egypt who were subsequently shipped home.⁷ In short, a defeated army was starting to influence affairs adversely.

To Maxwell it seemed as if matters might be coming to a head.

4 GOC Egypt to Quartermaster-General, India 9 Aug. 1915, L/MIL/17/5/3903; W.D. IEF 'G' 3 Sept. 1915, L/MIL/17/5/3953.
 5 McMahon to Grey 26 Aug. 1915, FO 800/48.
 6 Maxwell to Hamilton 18 Aug. 1915, Hamilton papers 5/12.
 7 Hamilton to Maxwell 24 Sept. 1915 and Hamilton to Maxwell 1 Oct. 1915, Hamilton papers 5/12.

In September an Egyptian Works Battalion in support of the MEF on the Gallipoli Peninsula mutinied. In itself this may not have been too serious, although the British saw it as proof of revolutionary societies being at work amongst the Egyptian population. Of far *greater* importance, however, was the manner in which the military dealt with the incident, because nine of the men had been shot and seven wounded on the orders of a British officer. It would be no easy business to keep the entire affair secret.⁸ And all the time while disconcerting news such as this was reaching Sir John he was glancing ever more nervously over his shoulder at his western border, where trouble seemed to be brewing. He became convinced that the Senussi was in collusion with the Turks, which meant he could not allow his military strength in Egypt to run down too much. To cap it all, he fell quite seriously ill early in September.⁹ Although open hostilities did not break out between the British and Sayed Ahmed until the middle of November, from August it was plain to see what direction affairs were moving in - a fact noted by Kitchener in London, who was becoming increasingly anxious about developments both inside Egypt and on her western frontier.¹⁰ As far as the Secretary of State for War was concerned the Senussi constituted a serious threat to the security of Egypt, especially were he to time his move to coincide with a Turkish attack upon the Suez Canal. Kitchener talked openly of 25,000 Arabs being available to Sayed Ahmed at the Dardanelles Committee in December, when London's attention was fixed firmly upon the Turkish danger on Egypt's eastern frontier.¹¹

8 Wingate to Herbert 14 Sept. 1915, Hamilton papers 3/30.

9 Maxwell to Hamilton 8 Sept. 1915, Hamilton papers 5/12.

10 Dardanelles Committee meeting 24 Sept. 1915, CAB 42/3/30.

11 Dardanelles Committee meeting 6 Dec. 1915, CAB 42/6/4.

Some detail has been given here to the deterioration in the internal situation in Egypt and on its western border so that the anxieties of Maxwell and Kitchener for Egypt's security, which may seem a little foolish in retrospect, can be appreciated more fully. In many ways, as we have seen, they had good reason to be worried and their fears undoubtedly added reality to the predictions that would soon be produced by intelligence officers warning of a major Turkish assault upon Egypt - predictions that also received apparent confirmation from the activities of the Senussi.¹²

Meanwhile, events in September in the Balkans complicated Egypt's role as a base for the Gallipoli operations still further and led to a reorganization of the administration of supplies in the country. The Bulgarian army mobilized with the obvious intention of attacking Serbia in the rear while that gallant country faced Austrian forces to the north. The Serbs called for help on the Greeks, who, in turn, requested the Allies to send troops so that Greece could provide the necessary support to an embattled Serbia. The result was yet another Allied campaign; in October British and French troops began to disembark in Salonica. The effect of this fresh development upon Egypt was the formation of the Levant Base by the War Office. This was a reorganized and enlarged version of the base that had already been created at Alexandria to meet the requirements of the MEF, the difference being that there was now the campaign in Macedonia also to consider; in order to prevent undue friction in Egypt the new base was placed directly under the

12 The emergence of the Senussi as a hostile force to the west of Egypt in November and the knowledge that Sayed Ahmed was negotiating with Turkish and German emissaries must have convinced the British that an attack in the east was likely at any time, thus creating two fronts to cover - yet this factor in the evaluation of Turkish strategy by London and Cairo has largely been ignored. For full details of the history of the Senussi see E. Evans-Pritchard, The Janusi of Cyrenaica (Oxford, 1949).

War Office via its commander, Lieutenant-General Altham. While it is probably correct to say that this piece of reorganization was 'the only way out of the supply business at that time and was entirely suitable', it caused problems of its own and stored up difficulties for the future.¹³ The great benefit the Levant Base brought to the distribution of supplies in Egypt was the direct control of the War Office: it could allocate supplies and stores to the commanders of the different campaigns (including Egypt) of its own accord, thus reducing the friction created by the competition of various generals for the same resources. There remained an anomaly, however; the Levant Base did not organize the purchase of local stores in Egypt - the Force in Egypt continued to do this, so that Maxwell and his men remained the only exception as far as the Base's jurisdiction was concerned.¹⁴ Moreover, with the evacuation of Gallipoli it ceased to be of such usefulness, and once an efficient base had been set up at Salonica its job was done; but its lingering presence in Egypt during December 1915 and the early months of 1916 caused confusion. General Altham, writing in December, concluded that if the Levant Base continued to perform its original role in Egypt it would mean, in administrative terms at least, 'confusion, misunderstanding and conflict of orders... a tangle which will lead to disaster.'¹⁵

13 G. MacMunn, Behind the scenes in many wars (London, 1930), p.178.

14 Official History, p.75.

15 'Memorandum on administrative responsibility for the armies operating in the Levant' by Altham 28 Dec. 1915, Robertson papers I/35/2/2.

ANXIETY ABOUT A TURKISH ATTACK ON EGYPT

It was inevitable that the policy-makers in London would have to consider the question of the evacuation of the MEF from Gallipoli if no further successes were achieved on the Peninsula or even seemed likely. Kitchener finally decided to face reality and on 11 October 1915 he asked Hamilton what he considered would be his losses if he were ordered to evacuate his positions. Events now moved rapidly, for on 15 October the unfortunate Hamilton received instructions to return home, Lieutenant-General Sir Charles Monro being appointed to replace him.

In part, the decision seriously to consider evacuation had been forced on the Secretary of State by changes in the strategic situation precipitated by German successes in the Balkans. Now that Bulgaria had entered the war and the Serbians had been forced away from the Constantinople railway it suddenly became much easier for Berlin to stiffen the Turkish armies with reinforcements and modern equipment; seen in this light, the MEF appeared most vulnerable perched on the Gallipoli Peninsula.¹⁶ But Egypt looked equally at risk should the MEF be withdrawn, for the huge numbers of Turkish troops concentrated around the Dardanelles would suddenly be freed to take part in a fresh attack upon the Suez Canal.¹⁷ This, of course, partly explains why there remained a strong body of opinion which advocated holding the MEF in position and so avoiding further damage to British prestige. Others argued, nevertheless, that to

¹⁶ Memorandum by W. S. Churchill 21 Aug. 1915, CAB 42/3/31.

¹⁷ Dardanelles Committee meeting 6 Oct. 1915, CAB 42/4/3.

cut one's losses and get out before being destroyed was surely the lesser of two evils in terms of the possible damage to British prestige: 'If we go now, we can "save face", for we can plead the Balkan situation... If the Balkan situation goes against us, and we are driven out, then our face is blackened throughout the East.'¹⁸

Prospects seemed none too rosy for Egypt in October 1915, therefore. But there was worse to come. Information available to Maxwell suggested that the enemy's communications had been improved. Much work had been done on the railway in Asia Minor, although the gaps round the Gulf of Iskanderun were still not filled. The real change, however, had come in Palestine, where the enemy had directed a branch railway line from Affula to Jerusalem southwards; by October it had reached Beersheba and from there a road was constructed to El Auja on the Egyptian border. This railway was only a single line of narrow gauge, but - to the British, at least - it seemed greatly to increase the importance of Beersheba as a base for an attack upon the Suez Canal. If Gallipoli were evacuated, this new line could present 'a serious menace', it was believed.¹⁹

This railway played a remarkable role in the formation of British strategy in Egypt and the Sinai quite out of proportion to its actual military significance. At the meeting of the Dardanelles Committee on 24 September 1915 the Prime Minister appeared most agitated by newspaper reports about this very line: 'he had read an alarming statement as to the construction by the Turks of the desert

18 Lovat Fraser to Curzon 6 Oct. 1915, Curzon papers MSS Eur F112/109.

19 Official History, pp.76-77.

railway... and that, according to the newspaper, it was said to be complete to within 30 miles of the Egyptian frontier.'²⁰ Asquith's information was somewhat inaccurate, as General Callwell explained, since the railway only reached to Beersheba, but this report came at an awkward time. The members of the Dardanelles Committee had already expressed concern for the internal condition of Egypt at the same meeting, and news of the Beersheba railway seemed to confirm Egypt's precarious position; the committee therefore demanded a report upon the progress of this new railway and the enemy's preparations for an assault on Egypt.²¹ Nor did Asquith let the matter slip; he had clearly been rattled by the sudden revelation and on 29 September he pressed Lord Kitchener on the subject of any further information received by the War Office concerning the railway, but the Secretary of State knew nothing more.²²

The subject simply would not disappear in London from now on, because the politicians had got it into their heads that the military had been caught out by this development and they were determined to discover the full truth of the matter. Unfortunately, the existence of the railway seemed to add reality to the Turkish threat to Egypt and when, early in November, Lloyd George asked the CIGS, now Lieutenant-General Murray, for details of events in the Sinai he was told that 'the railway had proceeded as far as Beersheba, which

20 Dardanelles Committee meeting 24 Sept. 1915, CAB 42/3/30.

21 Ibid. This proves the Official History (p.76) wrong, for it claims that Kitchener asked for a report on the railway after he raised the question of evacuation with Hamilton, whereas the minutes of the Dardanelles Committee demonstrate that this had already been done.

22 Dardanelles Committee meeting 29 Sept. 1915, CAB 42/3/34.

was about 130 miles from the Port Said end of the Suez Canal, and that the Turco-Germans evidently meant business.'²³ Meanwhile, the Beersheba railway had become a topic of general conversation in the privileged upper-reaches of London society, so that in mid-December Lady Northcliffe was heard to talk openly of the matter.²⁴ Even the Germans seemed to have taken an interest in the subject, and Austen Chamberlain circulated a copy of a public lecture given by a German academic early in December to his colleagues in the War Committee (which had replaced the Dardanelles Committee as Britain's highest level decision-making body for the war) which appeared to hint at current Turkish intentions: 'If Turkey completes the railway to the immediate neighbourhood of Egypt... then we have such a point of pressure against England, and can compel her to yield at any time.'²⁵ Even the railway itself seemed more threatening as 1915 came to an end, for reports began to reach the British that a water pipeline was being laid alongside it; this news lent a still greater degree of reality to the claim that this was part of a fresh enemy assault on Egypt.²⁶

But all this frantic anxiety about the Beersheba railway overlooked what Egyptian Intelligence continued to say on the subject. For example, as early as 19 August 1915 - long before the railway was even known about in London - their summaries reported that even

²³ War Committee meeting 5 Nov. 1915, CAB 42/5/3.

²⁴ T. Wilson (ed.), The political diaries of C. P. Scott, 1911-1928 (London, 1970), p.160. 11-15 Dec. 1915.

²⁵ 'Germany and the Middle East': copy of lecture by Dr Paul Rohrback 3 Dec. 1915, circulated by A. Chamberlain 27 Dec. 1915 CAB 37/139/56.

²⁶ War Committee meeting 5 Nov. 1915, CAB 42/5/3.

if the Turks won a major success at the Dardanelles and decided to launch a fresh attack upon Egypt the railway would be of 'little use' to them since they were very short of coal. More importantly still, Cairo realized that for the Turks the railway was not only a military venture: 'The railway is used as a bogie to impress Syrians and Bedouins that a time will come when the Turks will indeed succeed in their endeavours to take Egypt... It is also an excuse for delay of action.'²⁷ Lord Kitchener appeared to hold a similar view of the matter, for at the Dardanelles Committee meeting of 24 September when the entire affair first reared its ugly head in London he had dismissed the railway as a scare, and nothing more. In fact, one main reason for the concern shown in Whitehall was the belief that the line was being laid beyond Beersheba and into the Sinai. This fear was based upon a faulty interpretation of the information available because, although earth-works had been commenced beyond Beersheba, no rails were immediately available to the Turks to lay upon these foundations!²⁸ Even if it were the enemy's intention to extend the line across the Sinai and right up to the Canal, and they were able to obtain sufficient rails, the General Staff estimated in October that this could not even be started before early December 1915, since the necessary materials would have to be concentrated. As the distance from Beersheba to the Canal was 150 miles such a project would take three and a half months: thus, the middle of March 1916 was the earliest a Turkish

27 Intelligence Summary 19 Aug. 1915. Railways in Egypt and Palestine, WO 157/694.

28 Elgood, p.266; Ismailia Intelligence Report 16 Dec. 1915, WO 157/699.

railway could possibly approach anywhere near Egypt.²⁹ What the General Staff did not say, but which remained fairly obvious, was that a railway such as this would require elaborate defensive arrangements to protect it from raids into the Sinai by the British troops in Egypt. The water pipeline that was being constructed along with the railway need not have worried Egypt or London unduly as the Force in Egypt was aware of it at the end of October; according to their information it had not 'answered expectations' and, so far, the Turkish engineers had only managed to dam a stream!³⁰

The greatest problem generated by the existence of the Beersheba railway was the distortion it created in British estimates concerning a fresh Turkish attack upon the Suez Canal. During September Cairo and Whitehall were inundated by reports claiming that there almost certainly would be another assault in November or at some point during the winter.³¹ These reports, however, seemed to be flying in the face of the known positions of the Turkish army: 'Reports from Syria are persistent that the Turks intend to undertake another offensive against the Canal. Every available man in Syria appears, however, to have been sent North and the troops in Sinai are few.'³² What the British had picked up,

29 The present and prospective situation in Syria and Mesopotamia by General Staff and Admiralty War Staff 19 Oct. 1915. Appendix II: Notes on railways, CAB 42/4/13.

30 Summary of intelligence received October 1915, WO 95/4417.

31 Examples: Intelligence Summary 30 Sept. 1915, WO 157/695; Information through French agency 18 Sept. 1915, WO 157/736; Mr Howard to F.O. 16 Sept. 1915, FO 371/2357/133125; Sir A. Hardinge to F.O. 25 Sept. 1915, FO 371/2357/138787.

32 Intelligence Summary 22 Oct. 1915, WO 157/696.

therefore, was the Turks' long-term aim - to retake Egypt, an objective which had been given a degree of reality by deliberate enemy propaganda and attempts to mislead.³³ Djemal Pasha, for example, declared in the Turkish Parliament in October that the attack on Egypt of February 1915 had only been a reconnaissance to lay the basis for a second and far stronger attempt.³⁴ But political speeches did not prove military intent in 1915; the trouble was that the British were beginning to believe that what remained a vague objective for the Turks at this stage - a second attack on Egypt - was in fact a certainty. Enemy attempts to deceive Cairo and London continued into November 1915 with the Germans seeking to exaggerate the numbers of Turkish reinforcements available to face the British forces.³⁵ The success of these ruses was due not so much to their credibility as to the existence of the Beersheba railway, which appeared to lend substance to them by seeming to support the threat with tangible evidence. The failure of any attack to materialize in November or December did not invalidate the reports, for another factor came to bear: if Gallipoli were evacuated large numbers of Ottoman troops would be released, so the construction of the Beersheba railway appeared to prove that their destination would be the Sinai. Thus was British intelligence distorted - and in a most remarkable manner. Cairo was aware by December that Turkish preparations against Egypt were 'too tardy' for 'a colossal expedition'; if Djemal Pasha remained in Syria, however, a small expedition, like that of February, might be tried at any time, it

33 Intelligence Summary 4 June 1915, WO 157/692. Captured Turkish officers deliberately exaggerated the numbers of troops threatening Egypt.

34 Official History, p.78.

35 Note by A. Chamberlain to Curzon 19 Nov. 1915, Eur MSS F112/114.

was argued.³⁶ Unfortunately, the new railway, the expected evacuation of Gallipoli and concern over Egypt's internal condition, along with fear of the Senussi, tended to smother the more dispassionate musings of Cairo's intelligence officers.³⁷ The effect produced massive estimates of the size of the Turkish army believed to be concentrated to invade Egypt across the Sinai with German assistance.

Consequently, in October the General Staff talked of 'a considerable army' of Turks collecting to attack Egypt if the British left the Dardanelles.³⁸ In November the War Office was prepared to put a figure on this army; after careful calculation it seemed that the total number of troops available for operations against Egypt was 326,000, and these would probably be accompanied by at least one German division.³⁹ As Murray confessed after the war the War Office's estimates were 'sufficiently serious to give one food for thought.'⁴⁰ Although forecasts of the precise numbers varied as the men of Whitehall considered the different factors that would influence or hinder a Turkish build-up in the Sinai, they

36 Intelligence Summary 31 Dec. 1915, WO 157/698.

37 Another factor behind the failure of Cairo's estimates to gain a fair hearing in London may have been the War Committee's increasing frustration with General Maxwell and an inability on his part to communicate adequately with London using the information gathered by his Intelligence Department. This led to criticism of Egyptian Intelligence in the War Committee meeting of 20 November 1915 (CAB 42/5/17) and a call for it to be organized from London by Lloyd George.

38 The present and prospective situation in Syria and Mesopotamia, op.cit.

39 'German-Turkish concentration on Sinai frontier' 25 Nov. 1915, Murray papers 79/48/3.

40 Aldershot lecture by Murray, op.cit.

continued to be enormous or, as the Official History puts it, 'unduly pessimistic.'⁴¹ In December their expectations were as follows: by the end of January 1916 a maximum of 200,000 men would be concentrated on the Egyptian frontier, a number which, by the end of February, could be increased to 300,000.⁴² The weakness of all these calculations lay in their failure - due to the factors already outlined - to take into account the basic dynamics of the Ottoman Empire's military strategy in the war. She was not solely involved in a drive to occupy Egypt; she had also to contend with the demands of her Berlin allies, which could mean sending troops to the Balkans as well as her own campaigns in the Caucasus and Mesopotamia. In fact, early in November Egypt informed IEF Force D in Mesopotamia that the enemy seemed to be moving troops towards them.⁴³ As time passed and no attack materialized against Egypt others began to believe that the Turkish preparations had been only 'a huge bluff' or even an attempt to cover an attack in Mesopotamia or elsewhere.⁴⁴ As it turned out, this was a far more realistic understanding of Turkish intentions than that of the General Staff.

⁴¹ Official History, p.89.

⁴² 'Estimate of rate at which Turkish or German troops can be transferred from the vicinity of Constantinople, Smyrna or Erzeroun to the south of Palestine', WO 79/64.

⁴³ W.D. GSO1 3 & 14 Nov. 1915, WO 157/781.

⁴⁴ Wingate to Wigram 28 Dec. 1915, Wingate papers 135/7/187.

SPECULATION ABOUT ACTION ON THE SYRIAN COAST

The strong possibility of having to abort the Gallipoli venture and the intense concentration on Turkish communications in Asia Minor and Syria led to great attention being paid by the British to the Alexandretta region in the final months of 1915. Since the affair centred on how best to defend Egypt in the light of the retirement from Gallipoli one would have expected the initial impulse in the direction of Alexandretta to come from Egypt - and it did, but not from General Maxwell.⁴⁵ It was in fact the High Commissioner who made the first move - but not because he expected evacuation at Gallipoli. Sir Henry McMahon suggested a sudden attack at Alexandretta on 24 September because he feared there would be no further operations by the MEF that winter and, therefore, any offensive action on the Syrian coast could provide a necessary boost to British prestige.⁴⁶ McMahon was not thinking in purely political terms, because only two days earlier he had argued for a landing at Alexandretta as it would 'afford opportunity of employing mounted troops'.⁴⁷ The High Commissioner passed on his suggestions to General Maxwell and asked for his views; the GOC Egypt agreed with McMahon's ideas, though he explained that he did not know for sure that inactivity at the Dardanelles was contemplated during the winter.⁴⁸ This uncertainty was precisely what had bothered McMahon: 'It was the absence of any news of

⁴⁵ The Official History is incorrect in giving the impression that Maxwell first suggested the Alexandretta option at this time (p.78).

⁴⁶ McMahon to F.O. 24 Sept. 1915, FO 371/2480/138051.

⁴⁷ McMahon to F.O. 22 Sept. 1915, Clayton papers 693/9/4.

⁴⁸ McMahon to Maxwell 23 Sept. 1915, Clayton papers 693/9/5; Maxwell to McMahon 23 Sept. 1915, *ibid*.

probable activity this winter that made me suggest a raid on Alexandretta so as to relieve the tension here and further East.'⁴⁹

Meanwhile, in early October as speculation increased about the possibility of an evacuation from Gallipoli, the strategists in London began to turn seriously to thoughts of an amphibious raid to supplement whatever might befall the MEF. In one sense, the contemplation of retirement by the MEF seemed to add a degree of fluidity to British strategy in the eastern Mediterranean; it was as if the foundations had suddenly been removed and fresh ones needed to be laid.

At the Dardanelles Committee meeting of 7 October 1915 this new fluidity was all too apparent. Grey, Balfour and Carson - who actually made mention of McMahon's telegram of 24 September - all raised the question of the Alexandretta option; but it was not the only alternative considered by any means. Grey certainly saw Alexandretta as a necessary move if Gallipoli were abandoned, but he also put forward *Dedeagatch* in Asia Minor as another site for a potential landing to cover the MEF's retreat.⁵⁰ The uncertainty present at the meeting of 7 October remained. Hankey, while sure that the Dardanelles ought to be evacuated, started to write a memorandum advocating just this combined with an amphibious operation, but he could not bring himself to fill in the location of this landing or finish the paper itself.⁵¹ In his diary, however, he confided that he was thinking of either Haifa or Alexandretta as

49 McMahon to Fitzgerald 5 Oct. 1915, PRO 30/57/47.

50 Dardanelles Committee meeting 7 Oct. 1915, CAB 42/4/4.

51 Unfinished memorandum on the Dardanelles 8 Oct. 1915, CAB 63/9.

the probable location; he also wrote that even General Robertson, then CGS to the BEF, was 'not so strongly opposed to this as I expected.'⁵² It would seem that even Robertson could see some advantages to operations on the Syrian coast in the autumn and winter of 1915. Kitchener, too, was unsure of the best course of action and remained in two minds, but if he did decide to withdraw the MEF then he wanted 'an offensive operation at Alexandretta or elsewhere.'⁵³ These views of Kitchener, stated in a private note, are significant because they come prior to the Dardanelles Committee meeting of 11 October, at which he came down very strongly against any evacuation from Gallipoli, describing it as 'the most disastrous event in the history of the Empire.' In spite of these protestations, however, the course of the meeting followed the Secretary of State's true feelings, since it reflected the indecision of Britain's strategists. The meeting's ultimate decision was, in fact, no decision at all: fresh forces were to be sent to Egypt 'without prejudice to their ultimate destination or action, and for this purpose neither Alexandretta nor Salonica nor the Asiatic side of the Straits would be ruled out.'⁵⁴ Privately Lloyd George seems to have been perplexed by these events, although it would appear that he was now convinced that, since Serbia was doomed and Gallipoli was about to be abandoned, British forces would assault Alexandretta.⁵⁵

52 Hankey Diary 12 Oct. 1915.

53 Notes by Kitchener 9 Oct. 1915, WO 159/4.

54 Dardanelles Committee meeting 11 Oct. 1915, CAB 42/4/6.

55 Rough note by Lloyd George made at a Cabinet meeting 1915, Lloyd George papers D/21/1/27. The contents of this note suggest that it originates from just before or after the meeting of 11 Oct. 1915.

Alexandretta, or at least a landing along the Syrian coast at some point, remained the favourite amongst the various alternative amphibious operations being considered because of further developments elsewhere. In Mesopotamia General Townshend had defeated the Turks at Kut el Amara on 28 September. Suddenly the capture of Baghdad seemed a real possibility to some in London. In fact, such an attempt was fraught with risks, and the British campaign in Mesopotamia would be frustrated anyway by a fresh Turkish move in that direction along with one towards Egypt. On 14 October, consequently, Balfour suggested that the General Staff might consider whether the occupation of Alexandretta would block the road to both Egypt and Baghdad.⁵⁶ Balfour's idea was taken up by the Dardanelles Committee and the result was a substantial study of the matter by the General Staff and the Admiralty War Staff, entitled 'The Present and Prospective Situation in Syria and Mesopotamia' and dated 19 October 1915.

In this most important and wide-ranging memorandum the military advisers presented their opinion on the best strategy to be adopted in the Mediterranean and the Near East. Significantly, the General Staff gave a great deal of attention to the enemy's rail system in Asia Minor and Syria as they assessed the most appropriate site for a landing on the Syrian coast designed to disrupt this very system. Although they finally decided upon Alexandretta in this context it was not their only option; they examined other coastal towns including Latakia, Tripoli, Beirut, Haifa, Acre and even Jaffa, but none of them was thought to offer such a good anchorage as

56 Dardanelles Committee meeting 14 Oct. 1915, CAB 42/4/9.

Alexandretta in the Gulf of Iskanderun. Not surprisingly the possibility of hitting the new Beersheba railway was given some thought. This could probably have been undertaken only from one of the more southern coastal towns, such as Haifa, but the project was rejected in any case as 'too hazardous and difficult.' Alexandretta, on the other hand, had the added advantage of offering the possibility of disrupting communications with Mesopotamia as we have already seen. The General Staff accepted this and even argued that no serious advance ought to be made upon Baghdad unless the Alexandretta operation took place. As for the logistics of such a landing they suggested a force of 100,000 men, who would cut all communications between the Cilician Gates in the west and Marash and Aleppo in the east.⁵⁷

As it turned out, however, most of this was academic, for the same paper concluded by arguing that the MEF should be concentrated in Egypt, from where the defence of that country could most effectively be organized. The General Staff had therefore outlined the basic dilemma facing London - to defend Egypt in Syria or at the Suez Canal. The military saw the Alexandretta option as involving a permanent occupation designed to keep the Turkish lines of communication closed, thus depriving France of 100,000 men initially, and possibly more in the future. On the other hand, a move to Egypt would give Cairo time to arrange defensive positions along the Canal, and it did not altogether rule out operations against the Syrian coast, for these, it was argued, might prove most useful in the form of raids against the enemy's communications with the aim of inducing him to detach troops to cover his supply

⁵⁷ The present and prospective situation in Syria, op.cit.

lines. This latter, then, was the 'tactical defensive' option.⁵⁸

Although this advice - to defend Egypt at the Canal - would ultimately be followed it did not carry the day automatically in October 1915 in London. On the contrary, it caused something of a storm. Kitchener let it be known that he did not agree with the findings of the memorandum by writing a short note at the end of the paper itself and saying so at the Dardanelles Committee.⁵⁹ Nor did the paper of 19 October terminate all debate on the matter. On 25 October, for example, at the Dardanelles Committee Lloyd George suggested that Alexandretta might offer a large command for the French General Sarraill and that the British ought soon to raise 'the whole question of alternative operations, Gallipoli, the Asiatic shore, Syria, Alexandretta and so on.'⁶⁰ For one thing a policy of defending Egypt along the Suez Canal looked unattractive because it gave the impression that London would fill the country with men who could be better employed elsewhere. The French certainly began to see things this way and were not averse to offering advice to London on the subject. For example, General Gallieni told Esher that he had 'grave doubts' about such a policy, and added: 'In the East the defensive is never the most prudent form of military action.'⁶¹

58 Op.cit. The fact that this memorandum did not rule out raids on the Syrian coast (while it advocated a passive defence of Egypt) is often overlooked. (Official History, p.78.)

59 Note by Kitchener 20 Oct. 1915 at end of Curzon's copy of 'The present and prospective situation in Syria', MSS Eur F112/158; Dardanelles Committee meeting 21 Oct. 1915, CAB 42/4/15.

60 Dardanelles Committee meeting 25 Oct. 1915, CAB 42/4/15.

61 Notes by Lord Esher of a conversation with Gen. Gallieni 27 Oct. 1915, CAB 42/4/19.

Meanwhile, events in the Mediterranean were gaining a momentum all of their own that Whitehall could no longer control. On the final day of October General Monro, whose role it was to give his opinion as to the situation at Gallipoli, recommended evacuation and the transfer of the MEF to Egypt.⁶² But the Secretary of State for War would not capitulate just yet; fortified by a firm letter from Maxwell deprecating the effect on Egypt of a total evacuation, he wrote to the Prime Minister to register his protest and to Monro asking the general if he had considered the damage that could be done to Egypt by such action and whether he had looked at 'where the Turks can be engaged elsewhere.'⁶³

These were more or less Kitchener's final actions on the matter before leaving for France and then the Mediterranean to examine the situation for himself. On 10 November he arrived at Mudros and with McMahon, Maxwell, Monro, Admiral de Robeck and General Birdwood commenced an examination of the military prospects in the region. Not surprisingly his conclusion took the form of further suggestions for a landing at Alexandretta.⁶⁴ In this Kitchener was strongly supported by McMahon, who informed Grey that after 'thorough discussion' with naval and military experts he was convinced that the best way to defend Egypt was from outside and 'at some point as far distant as possible,' i.e., Alexandretta.⁶⁵

In London, however, they were horrified by this turn of events. At first some members of the War Committee (the renamed Dardanelles

62 Monro to Kitchener 31 Oct. 1915, CAB 42/5/20.

63 Kitchener to Asquith 1 Nov. 1915, Asquith MSS 121F.12;
Kitchener to Monro 1 Nov. 1915, PRO 30/57/64.

64 Official History, pp.79-80.

65 McMahon to Grey 11 Nov. 1915, FO 800/48.

Committee) were confused by Kitchener's intentions and failed fully to grasp the meaning of his telegram until Asquith clarified it. He explained that the men at Mudros advocated a 'conditional evacuation' of Gallipoli provided that, before it was completed, it would be possible to strike elsewhere. In short, Kitchener was prepared to allow the evacuation of the Suvla and Anzac positions on the Peninsula while retaining that of Cape Helles and landing men at Alexandretta in Ayas Bay. The CIGS, not given to expressing his true feelings in public, admitted that this new scheme 'rather frightened' him, and there followed a sharp exchange of telegrams between the War Office and the Secretary of State on the subject.⁶⁶ General Murray's reaction was not unique, for Kitchener's proposals seem to have thrown the War Office into turmoil. Maurice Hankey described the meeting of 12 November as 'appallingly bad' and noted in his diary that Asquith had 'experienced surprise' in the afternoon that Hankey had been 'able to evolve any conclusions at all' from the discussion.⁶⁷ The General Staff was certainly confused. On 11 November, for example, General Callwell was not sure, when asked, whether Kitchener's intention was to employ fresh troops at Alexandretta or to use those from Gallipoli. As the days passed, however, it became clearer that the Secretary of State actually wanted more divisions from France for action at Alexandretta, which, in the opinion of Henry Wilson, made him 'as mad as an ass.'⁶⁸

With Kitchener absent in the Mediterranean the War Office were determined to oppose advice they considered potentially disastrous, and this they did. The General Staff argued that there were numerous

⁶⁶ War Committee meeting 12 Nov. 1915, CAB 42/5/8.

⁶⁷ Hankey Diary 12 Nov. 1915, HNKY 1/1.

⁶⁸ Henry Wilson Diary 11-14 Nov. 1915.

objections to the proposal, among which the following were the most cogent: The expedition would have to force its way 25 miles inland and hold a perimeter of about 50 miles, an enterprise which could require at least 150,000 troops; such an operation would not weaken Germany in the main theatre of war at all; even if only for a while, Britain would find herself engaged in the Gallipoli, Macedonia and Alexandretta campaigns simultaneously; finally, the Navy objected since it was unlikely that enough small craft could be assembled for such a venture, and, even if they could, the creation of a new transport route of 400 miles (from Port Said) would be a heavy additional burden.⁶⁹

One further objection to action in the Ayas Bay region was ultimately to prove perhaps the most formidable - Paris. The General Staff paper had quoted the views of both the French General Staff and their Admiralty, not only because they happened to coincide with those of the War Office, but also for reasons of diplomacy. Syria remained an area of national interest to the French and they were sensitive to any unilateral action by the British in this region. General Murray was cautioned by the French Military Attaché in London along these lines in November and informed that Paris wished for consultation on the subject.⁷⁰ The Foreign Office therefore urged the need for an Anglo-French conference and this duly took place on 16 November. The Prime Minister afterwards informed Kitchener that the Government had

69 'A statement of military considerations as to the advisability of undertaking an expedition... for the purpose of severing... the Turkish communications from Asia Minor... to Syria and Egypt' 16 Nov. 1915 by General Staff and Admiralty War Staff, WO 106/1570.

70 Note for Gen. Sir A. Murray 13 Nov. 1915 by French Military Attaché in London, CAB 42/5/10.

decided to reject his scheme.⁷¹ Paris effectively killed off any chance the expedition had of being implemented: it demanded that any Allied force which landed in the region of Alexandretta must be two-thirds French, and they could not spare so many men at this stage. For some it was frustrating, but, as General Callwell explained, the whole affair demonstrated the realities of fighting in an alliance: 'we have got to keep in with our infernal Allies' he is reported to have remarked.⁷²

Even a decision so apparently final did not prevent continual speculation about operations along the Syrian coast. In part this was due to geography: 'Alexandretta is so enticing, and looks so plausible on the map, that it warps perspective.'⁷³ A glance at the map during the months of October and November 1915 encouraged many an amateur strategist to make suggestions for British policy in Syria and Asia Minor. Colonel Repington, for example, a journalist and close friend of many of the leading soldiers, managed to gain Bonar Law's attention with a long letter that seems to have impressed the Conservative leader at the end of November. Repington was dissatisfied by a passive defence of Egypt; he wanted to raid every point along the Syrian coast in order to tie the enemy to coastal defence, and if the Turks continued to advance he advocated leaving 150,000 men on the Canal while cutting in behind the attacking force by amphibious operations with 350,000 men at 'El Arish, Haifa, Beirut, Alexandretta or wherever I could best influence and ruin the Turkish expedition.'⁷⁴

71 F.O. to Bertie 14 Nov. 1915, FO 371/2480/171220.

72 Parker to Clayton 19 Nov. 1915, Clayton papers 135/6/13.

73 Lovat Fraser to Curzon 15 Nov. 1915, MSS Eur F112/110.

74 Repington to Bonar Law 24 Nov. 1915, Bonar Law papers 51/5/44.
C. Repington, The First World War, 1914-1918 (London, 1920), I, p.69.

Another strategist who was amateur in the sense that he had no direct role in the formulation of official thinking on the defence of Egypt was Reginald Wingate, the Sirdar of the Sudan. He drew up a scheme more ambitious than even Repington's. His grand strategy for the Allies in the Near East consisted of an immediate landing at Alexandretta (he was writing in November) to 'hold the neck of the bottle' while the British in Mesopotamia advanced beyond Baghdad and the army in Egypt either marched north to Jaffa or Haifa or landed at these points to support the army at Alexandretta; finally, Britain's Allies would lend a hand - French forces would land at Smyrna and Beirut or Tripoli while the Russians would push for Trebizond. Wingate wanted to remain at Gallipoli as well and intended to use Indian troops and cavalry from France for these operations as they were wasted on the Western Front. How simple it all seemed on paper!⁷⁵

Mark Sykes, an M.P. and Middle Eastern expert, cherished an equally ambitious aim, involving the opportunity to occupy 'practically the whole of the Arab speaking provinces of the Ottoman Empire.' This was to be effected initially by three steps: forces were to be landed at Alexandretta, the Cilician Gates would then be taken and finally an additional force would be disembarked at Haifa. Like Wingate, Sykes mentioned the unique aspects of a campaign in Syria against the Turks. Because they fought well from defensive positions, Sykes insisted, Turkish troops should be assaulted 'in the open on the offensive by mobile manoeuvre.'⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Note on the Near East, Nov. 1915, PRO 30/57/47. This appears to be the original pencil-written version with a hand-drawn map. Wingate or someone had the paper typed, for there is another version in the Curzon papers: see MSS Eur F112/110.

⁷⁶ Policy in the Middle East. Memorandum by M. Sykes, and covering letter Sykes to Callwell 15 Nov. 1915, Bonar Law papers 56/XI/3.

Cavalry would, of course, be ideal for such operations.

At the end of November Gertrude Bell, a noted Arabist who was then in Egypt helping with intelligence work, drew up a long and detailed letter arguing most strongly for the Ayas Bay option. She believed that an amphibious operation at Alexandretta might actually be more economical in troop numbers than any defence based along the Suez Canal.⁷⁷ This was more significant than it might have appeared at first blush, for others with a more influential role in British strategy were still most interested in action at Alexandretta and remained prepared to state their case. McMahon continued to press for it in the strongest terms: 'I feel it my duty to urge most strongly that alternative policy of meeting Turco-German advance in Cilicia may be considered.'⁷⁸ Even the General Staff was not entirely the rigid monolith of uniform opinion that it seemed. Sir Archibald Murray himself actually advocated staying at Cape Helles on Gallipoli and seems to have seen some sense in ^{the} Ayas Bay scheme.⁷⁹

With all these various schemes flying round in Egypt and London it is not surprising that the possibility of offensive action in Syria stayed on the agenda into December. At the War Committee meeting of 2 December 1915, for instance, the question of Alexandretta was raised in the context of covering the evacuation of the Dardanelles. Bonar Law, surely influenced by Repington and perhaps others, 'asked if it was possible to take Damascus by a sudden coup and hold it temporarily, as a counterfoil to the

77 G. Bell to Cromer 29 Nov. 1915, WO 79/64.

78 McMahon to Bertie 28 Nov. 1915, PRO 30/57/47.

79 War Committee meeting 16 Nov. 1915, CAB 42/5/14. Lecture by Murray at Aldershot 26 Feb. 1936, Murray papers 79/48/2.

evacuation of the Peninsula.' Kitchener's response was that his Ayas Bay scheme would be better, but Bonar Law's outburst demonstrates both the influence of the amateur strategists and the general shift in many quarters towards a more offensive stance in the Near East.⁸⁰ And this attitude continued into the middle of December. At the War Committee on 16 December, for example, Kitchener, Crewe and Lloyd George all showed enthusiasm for action in the Alexandretta region and Asquith found himself having to demand a decision from his colleagues 'at once.' On the other hand, at the same meeting Admiral Jackson expressed his personal preference for Beirut and Haifa as positions from which to strike at the Turks, with Haifa as the better of the two.⁸¹ Nor was the admiral alone in London in looking to areas other than the region of Ayas Bay for amphibious operations in Syria. Leo Amery, for one, advocated 'a counter-stroke at Haifa or Alexandretta' to cover Egypt if it were attacked.⁸²

Attention paid to offensive action in Syria was not confined to the possible execution of amphibious operations. By December Mark Sykes was in favour of a land offensive from Egypt across the Sinai and into Palestine as far as Acre.⁸³ General Hamilton had not been idle since his return to London from the Mediterranean: he sought Asquith's support for a similar, but still more ambitious venture, as he explained to Churchill later in the war:

80 War Committee meeting 2 Dec. 1915, CAB 42/6/2. Kitchener was still arguing at this time that Alexandretta was not in France's sphere of influence in Syria at all.

81 War Committee meeting 16 Dec. 1915, CAB 42/6/9.

82 Note on the General Staff memorandum by Amery 13 Dec. 1915, Murray papers 79/48/2.

83 War Committee meeting 16 Dec. 1915, CAB 42/6/9.

'Egypt had to be organised to support a great Anglo-Indian army with munitions as well as food, and a steady advance of large forces had to be commenced at once through the Holy Land to the straits.'⁸⁴

It is remarkable that even though the British were about to evacuate Gallipoli and were reeling from what seemed to be a major failure in the war against the Turk there could be so much advocacy for offensive action in Syria.

DEFENDING EGYPT ALONG THE CANAL

The official decision by H.M. Government to abandon further planning for an expedition to the Ayas Bay region naturally meant that much attention was suddenly focussed upon the Suez Canal defences in Egypt and their strength and adequacy to meet a serious enemy attack. In fact this shift of attention had begun before mid-November. At the War Committee on 5 November Lloyd George asked for details of the measures taken to defend the Canal; in reply General Murray could say little other than that the defence would be conducted by holding ground east of the Canal.⁸⁵ The War Committee was clearly not satisfied with the information offered by the CIGS and so it requested a full report from General Maxwell; at the instigation of Balfour it was also decided to send an officer 'acquainted with the latest principles and practices in the construction of entrenchments' to advise Maxwell.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Hamilton to Churchill 11 July 1917, Hamilton papers 1/15.

⁸⁵ Murray had very little to go on other than a vague comment by Maxwell in a telegram in Oct. that the defence would be similar to that of Feb. and a brief W.O. paper of the same month. See Official History, p.77 and 'The defence of Egypt' 22 Oct. 1915, WO 106/42 C3/35.

⁸⁶ War Committee meeting 5 Nov. 1915, CAB 42/5/3.

Whitehall's lack of knowledge concerning the true state of defensive preparations at the Suez Canal was symptomatic of the way in which this whole matter had been neglected because of the Gallipoli operation and the uncertainty over British strategy in October and November. By the beginning of November, consequently, Egypt was defended by what has been described as 'a lightly held line... on the Suez Canal.' This line was held by about one division of Indian troops supplemented by defensive positions on the Canal's east bank to cover bridges and ferries; between these positions small intermediate posts had been established from which the east bank was patrolled.⁸⁷ And this was all that had been done. The real situation was worse. Early in November Egypt had no information about the number of troops who might be allotted to these defences in the future, nor had any definite line of defence actually been decided upon. No organization existed to carry out any serious expansion of the works and the Force in Egypt had only one company of sappers and miners and six engineer officers in the entire country.⁸⁸

But the men in London were becoming frustrated at their lack of information and they expressed their exasperation that they still had not heard from Maxwell on 13 November. Nonetheless, they could discuss something of substance concerning the Egyptian defences; Brigadier-General Grant, who had been sent out to Gallipoli to advise on bombproof shelters, had gone to Egypt and would, it was hoped, provide Sir John with expert advice regarding the construction of defensive works. But Balfour, who took a keen interest in this matter

87 Report of Engineer works in Egypt 1 Jan. 1916-31 Dec. 1916, Murray papers 79/48/2.

88 Report on water supply to the Egyptian Field Force, Murray papers 79/48/2.

and had many useful suggestions to make whenever it was considered, looked beyond a mere passive defence of the Canal. He now raised the idea of using armoured cars in the Sinai with the intention of striking at the Turkish railway believed to be under construction beyond Beersheba. The CIGS seemed to like the idea and recommended that Maxwell be asked how many men he would need to form mobile columns.⁸⁹ Balfour reiterated this desire to strike at the enemy's preparations for an attack across the Sinai at the 20 November meeting and it was taken up by the Prime Minister three days later.⁹⁰ To the politicians in London it appeared inconceivable that some such attempt should not be tried - but they were quite unaware of the true situation at the Canal.⁹¹

Meanwhile, General Maxwell had finally entered the fray. He had, of course, left Egypt to consult with Kitchener and other generals concerning the evacuation of Gallipoli and the defence of Egypt, but on 16 November he found time to telegraph Cairo and order the defence of the Canal to be 'taken up in depth' by indenting for stores and material in anticipation of the line that would be adopted 'after study.'⁹² It was hardly the ideal start to the job, but it was, at least, a start. Maxwell did not, in fact, return to Egypt until 25 November 1915, but on the very afternoon of his arrival he called a conference and ordered the doubling of the railway to Ismailia which would facilitate defensive preparations in the future.⁹³ In the meantime Lord Kitchener had contacted the War Office and outlined the material requirements necessary for a serious defensive line east of the Canal, and it was now obvious in London that materials and

89 War Committee meeting 13 Nov. 1915, CAB 42/5/10.

90 War Committee meeting 20 Nov. 1915, CAB 42/3/17; War Committee meeting 23 Nov. 1915, CAB 42/5/20.

91 Cromer to Balfour 12 Dec. 1915, WO 79/64.

92 Report of Engineer works, op.cit. and Maxwell to GOC Egypt 16 Nov. 1915, Murray papers 79/48/2.

93 Comments from Gen. Malcolm 13 Dec. 1925, CAB 47/79.

munitions were needed on 'a huge scale.'⁹⁴ At the War Committee Murray told his colleagues that he was depressed by the news he had received from Egypt, for it appeared that 'practically nothing had been done' before this.⁹⁵

There was depression, too, in Egypt. According to McMahon, Maxwell's staff were 'despondent about doing what should be done within the time available' as far as the new defences were concerned.⁹⁶ And although Maxwell told Kitchener that he was going 'full steam ahead' with all preparations others were less optimistic and confessed that it would be 'a race to get things ready in time.'⁹⁷ This gloom was caused not merely by the paucity of defensive work done previously, but also by the shortage of troops to man the new defences. By the end of November there were only about 60,000 men in Egypt, most of them details of various formations and untrained recruits from Australia and New Zealand. The shortage resulted partly from the loss of the 28th Indian Brigade and other Indian units to Basra, where events had deteriorated after General Townshend's pyrrhic victory at Ctesiphon.

Meanwhile Maxwell had responded fully to the War Committee's demands about his requirements for his command's security. He estimated that Egypt needed 12 infantry divisions, a cavalry division and 20 batteries of heavy and siege artillery for the eastern front

94 Official History, p.84.

95 War Committee meeting 23 Nov. 1915, CAB 45/5/20.

96 McMahon to Grey 30 Nov. 1915, FO 800/48.

97 Maxwell to Kitchener 11 Dec. 1915, Murray papers 79/48/2.

McMahon to Grey 14 Dec. 1915, Lloyd George papers D/19/4/3.

alone, and he expected that the enemy would be able to commence operations early in February 1916, a fact which explained the urgency felt by his staff officers.⁹⁸ At the War Office there was horror at these figures, but no definite opinion on a more accurate estimate. For example, in October a War Office paper had calculated the numbers needed at only four divisions.⁹⁹ This now appeared woefully inadequate and Callwell reckoned it best to work on the assumption that seven divisions would be necessary until March 1916.¹⁰⁰ The final General Staff estimate of 11 December 1915, however, put the numbers required for the Canal front at eight infantry divisions and five mounted brigades.¹⁰¹

The General Staff's contribution to this matter reveals two important factors which influenced London at this time. The first is the very real anxiety felt for Egypt. Both Kitchener (who was known to be in a panic about the country) and the future CIGS, General Robertson, shared this anxiety; on 11 December Robertson wrote: 'The defence of Egypt gives me considerable anxiety just now because Egypt is the one place where perhaps we can be rather badly hit.'¹⁰² Secondly, as the General Staff admitted in their paper, they could not be certain about their estimate. This confession by the War Office helps us to see the immediate events in London in the correct perspective. Kitchener returned to England and sought advice on the defence of Egypt wherever he could find it. As it turned out General

98 Official History, p.83. Maxwell was clearly influenced by his fear of a large Turkish attack that seemed all the more threatening on account of the weaknesses of his defensive arrangements.

99 'The defence of Egypt', op.cit.

100 Callwell to Wilson 10 Dec. 1915, Henry Wilson papers 73/1/18.

101 'Estimate by the General Staff of forces required for defence of Egypt' by A. Murray. 11 Dec. 1915, WO 106/1542.

102 Robertson to Wigram 11 Dec. 1915, Robertson papers I/12/29.

Haig was in the capital and the Secretary of State asked him to examine the question in detail. Since Haig knew little about Egypt he asked for the War Office's advice, so his resulting memorandum reflected the General Staff's desire to produce an estimate lower than Maxwell's and their view on how the defence should be laid out.¹⁰³

The General Staff wanted the Force in Egypt to occupy Qatia in the Sinai, thereby denying vital water supplies to an attacking force and so limiting its size; this would reduce the numbers needed to garrison Egypt. Maxwell, on the other hand, supported by General Horne (whom Kitchener had despatched to the Canal to scrutinize the new defensive line), believed that there was no time available for such an ambitious project, and he felt he ought to concentrate on the main defences instead.¹⁰⁴ This rift between London and Cairo became so serious that it emerged as a matter for discussion at the War Committee on 15 December.¹⁰⁵ Although Kitchener and Murray were agreed that Qatia should be occupied, they could not overrule the views of the men on the spot; any such advance, therefore, had to be postponed for the moment.¹⁰⁶ Any number of detailed memoranda in London were unable to resolve the problem of Egypt's defence: the solution lay rather in appointing a responsible officer from London who could take the matter in hand at once in Egypt itself.¹⁰⁷

103 Callwell to Robertson 9 Dec. 1915, Robertson papers I/8/38. For Haig's memorandum see 'Estimate of forces required for the immediate defence of a second line to protect the Canal against attack from the east', WO 106/711.

104 W.O. to Maxwell 27 Nov. 1915 and Maxwell to W.O. 29 Nov. 1915, Murray papers 79/48/3.

105 War Committee meeting 15 Dec. 1915, CAB 42/6/8.

106 Official History, p.90.

107 Robertson to Callwell 11 Dec. 1915, Robertson papers I/8/39.

British concern with Egypt, meanwhile, was beginning to cause some tension with Paris. At the Calais Anglo-French Conference on 5 December 1915, for instance, the French expressed their doubts as to the reality of the thrust to Egypt and the prospect of troops being withdrawn from Salonica to secure Egypt's defence.¹⁰⁸ They were even more sensitive to any reports of British troops being transferred from France to Egypt.¹⁰⁹ But these signs of possible strife with France did not discourage Kitchener in his determination to strengthen Egypt, and he arranged for two divisions from France and one from the United Kingdom to be assigned to Maxwell in order to ensure security before the MEF started to arrive 'en masse'. So unhappy was General Robertson, now CIGS, about this decision to deprive the BEF of men that he felt it necessary to apologise to Haig and to explain the true nature of the situation in Egypt: 'Commanders, staffs and troops have been so chopped and changed during the last few weeks that no one can tell me where any one is, or make even a rough shot at an order of battle.'¹¹⁰ Of course, in part this confusion was due to the arrival of troops from Gallipoli. The evacuation of the Anzac and Suvla positions was completed by the morning of 20 December and the MEF's final hold on the Peninsula, at Cape Helles, was relinquished on 8 January 1916. Troops now began to pour into Egypt and the country entered a new phase of its role in the war.

108 'Conseil franco-anglais tenu à Calais, le 5 décembre 1915', CAB 28/1.

109 Grey to Kitchener 6 Dec. 1915, FO 800/102.

110 Robertson to Haig 26 Dec. 1915, Robertson papers I/22/3. The promised two divisions from France were never actually sent to Egypt.

CHANGES IN THE COMMAND IN EGYPT

The concentration of attention on the Egyptian defences in November and December 1915 proved most damaging for Maxwell's reputation in London. Repeated talk of sending an expert on modern trench warfare to Egypt tended to undermine Sir John's standing at the War Committee by lending the impression that he was incapable of adapting to modern warfare. Perhaps more damaging still was what was considered to be the scandalous state of the Suez Canal defences in November. Lest this be thought too strong a description of the feeling held towards Maxwell in London we quote the enlightening comment of Lord Cromer: 'It is really almost criminal on the part of Maxwell not to have prepared plans for the defence of Egypt.'¹¹¹ And, of course, the commander of the Force in Egypt was still unable to throw off the criticisms of his performance during the Turkish attack on the Canal in February - criticisms which now began to be raised again.¹¹²

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that one finds mention in the minutes of the War Committee of discussions concerning General Maxwell on at least three separate occasions in November and early December.¹¹³ Voices now started to be raised in favour of a change of command in Egypt. At the meeting of 20 November, for example, Lloyd George asked the Prime Minister if Lord Kitchener had considered this very thing. Asquith replied that he had not - but even the Prime Minister was beginning to think along these lines himself, for

¹¹¹ Cromer to Curzon 20 Dec. 1915, MSS Eur F112/110.

¹¹² Cromer to Balfour 12 Dec. 1915, WO 79/64.

¹¹³ See War Committee meeting 13 Nov. 1915, CAB 42/5/10; War Committee meeting 20 Nov. 1915, CAB 42/5/7; War Committee meeting 15 Dec. 1915, CAB 42/6/8.

on 23 November he told the War Committee that he wanted Kitchener to send a more efficient officer than Maxwell to Egypt.¹¹⁴ There was an acknowledged problem here: the Secretary of State remained most loyal to Sir John, who had been one of his protégés before the war and whom he trusted to govern Egypt successfully.

But Kitchener could not entirely ignore the mounting pressure for some sort of change. By November Egypt had gained such a high profile in British strategy that there were calls for an officer of the highest calibre to assume command of its defence and, indeed, the whole situation in the Mediterranean that required the strong direction of a single directing hand.¹¹⁵ The Secretary of State believed, however, that he had found a way to keep Maxwell in Egypt while bowing to the pressure which demanded a new hand at the helm of that country's defences. His compromise, if it can be called that, was reached not only because of his loyalty to Maxwell but also as a result of the actual situation in Egypt itself.

As early as November 1914 concern had been expressed in Egypt that one man simply could not administer the country and command its armed forces alone. This argument had really been proved by Maxwell's behaviour in February 1915 when he permitted his subordinate on the Canal to direct operations against the attacking Turks. This division of responsibility seems to have been recognized unofficially before December because the GOC Suez Canal Defences was being addressed separately from Maxwell by authorities outside the country as a matter of course as early as October.¹¹⁶ McMahon suggested the

114 Ibid.

115 Robertson to Callwell 11 Dec. 1915, Robertson papers I/8/39.

116 C in C India to GOC Canal Defences and GOC Egypt 27 Oct. 1915, L/MIL/17/5/3905.

official recognition of this division of responsibility to Kitchener at Mudros in November so that there might be an independent commander at the Suez Canal.¹¹⁷ Kitchener grasped at this and pressed for Maxwell to remain in Egypt while Monro, who had completed his task at Gallipoli, took over at the Canal. But events in London were to alter his choice of personnel somewhat and lead to a serious clash of wills in Whitehall.

During December General Sir William Robertson was appointed CIGS in place of Murray. The Prime Minister, Kitchener and Robertson were faced with the difficulty of what Murray should be offered in compensation, for there existed a general feeling that he had been poorly treated. The new CIGS believed Sir Archibald deserved 'good employment' so he suggested offering him command of an Army Corps in France.¹¹⁸ It appears that this offer was made to the departing CIGS but received an unfavourable response; he 'blustered so much' that an alternative arrangement had to be sought.¹¹⁹ That decided upon emerged after, in Hankey's words, 'poor Murray' had had a 'trying interview' on 16 December with the Prime Minister.¹²⁰ It would seem that at this interview the idea of sending Sir Archibald to Egypt emerged for the first time, proving most acceptable to the ex-CIGS. He wrote to Hankey the next day declaring he would be glad to go to the Mediterranean, though he believed his removal was most unfair.¹²¹ Although sentiment

117 McMahon to Grey 28 Dec. 1915, FO 800/48.

118 Robertson to Kitchener 12 Dec. 1915, Robertson papers I/13/32.

119 Henry Wilson Diary 19 Dec. 1915.

120 Hankey Diary 16 Dec. 1915, HNKY 1/1.

121 Murray to Hankey 17 Dec. 1915, Hankey papers HNKY 4/7.

clearly played a part in this decision of Asquith and its subsequent ratification by Robertson and Kitchener this does not mean that Murray was unsuitable for his new job.¹²² As CIGS he had been at the very centre of much of the strategic thinking on the evacuation of the Dardanelles, Alexandretta, Salonica and the defence of Egypt; indeed, it might be argued that he was perhaps as qualified as anyone for his new command. So it was General Murray who obtained the new job in the eastern Mediterranean and not Monro. And what a job! Robertson described it as a 'Commander-in-Chief in the Mediterranean' with his headquarters in Egypt.¹²³

While the new CIGS was prepared to allow his predecessor to transfer to Egypt, however, he was none too happy with the intended command-structure. He was anxious about the prospect of two generals having responsibility for Egypt's defence and in a subtle move he tried to get the Foreign Office to recommend that Maxwell become a mere military administrator of martial law attached to the High Commissioner.¹²⁴ Unfortunately, Kitchener would not budge and his position was strengthened by the support of McMahon in Egypt who disapproved of the proposal to strip Maxwell of so many of his powers.¹²⁵ The dispute between the CIGS and the Secretary of State inflicted a certain degree of paralysis on Egypt since the matter was 'hung up' for several days while both parties refused to compromise.¹²⁶ Finally, after having spent two hours daily

122 Percy to Henry Wilson 22 Dec. 1915, Henry Wilson papers 73/1/19.

123 Robertson to Wigram 11 Dec. 1915, Robertson papers I/12/29.

124 F.O. to McMahon 24 Dec. 1915, FO 800/48.

125 McMahon to F.O. 28 Dec. 1915, FO 800/48.

126 Robertson to Haig 26 Dec. 1915, Robertson papers I/22/3.

discussing the problem for nearly a week with Kitchener, Robertson was unable to prevent the Secretary of State from going to Asquith and threatening to resign if his proposal for two separate commanders in Egypt was not accepted.¹²⁷ Kitchener had won the day although Robertson had made sure that he had taken a written protest against the proposal with him when he went to see the Prime Minister. In this note the CIGS explained his objections to the proposed decision to allow Maxwell to retain responsibility for internal affairs in Egypt and the security of its western frontier while Murray assumed command at the Canal; he was convinced that it 'lead to trouble', he explained, because much of the Allies' ill-success in the war so far could be laid at the door of a lack of unity of command and, with a major attack expected against Egypt, this new arrangement could cause 'grave difficulties.'¹²⁸ He was to be proved correct very soon.

127 Robertson to Haig 31 Dec. 1915, Robertson papers I/22/4.

128 Robertson note to Kitchener 30 Dec. 1915, WO 159/4.



MAP No. 3: THE DISTRIBUTION OF ARAB TRIBES

CHAPTER 7

EGYPT AND THE SEARCH FOR ALLIES:

AUGUST 1914 - DECEMBER 1915

'It was the most unfortunate date in my life when I was left in charge of the Arab movement... it is nothing to do with me: it is a purely military business.'

Sir Henry McMahon 12 September 1916

THE WAR OFFICE AND THE PEOPLES OF SYRIA AND ARABIA BEFORE 1914

Whether the British could expect support and assistance from the indigenous population of the Ottoman Empire had been a subject of considerable debate before the war. During the CID's consideration of the defence of Egypt in the period prior to 1909, for example, the General Staff concluded that it would be satisfied to gain 'active assistance of a certain kind' from disaffected members of the Syrian population.¹ In line with this kind of thinking the soldiers in London had turned their gaze towards the Arab nomads of the desert to the east of Syria who were believed to be 'sufficiently organised for raiding and guerilla warfare, but not able to undertake any sustained campaign against the Turkish army.'² The possibility of a general revolt in Syria against Ottoman rule was not totally ignored although the War Office remained somewhat nervous about any uncontrolled fanaticism. Significantly, therefore,

1 'Scheme for an attack on Haifa. Part I. Strategical', no date, WO 106/42 C3/14B.

2 Military report on Arabia by General Staff 1904, WO 33/331.
See Map No 3: The distribution of Arab tribes, before this chapter.

if tribes such as the Beni Sakhr were to be contacted the officers concerned would have to be careful to ensure that general raids into the settled urban centres of Syria were discouraged. It was argued that these potential tribal allies ought rather to be used to attack the Hejaz railway, which ran from Damascus to Mecca, between Deraa and Amman in the east of Syria so as to disrupt enemy troop movements.³

It had been thought possible that any British military operations in Syria in defence of Egypt could spark off a general rebellion in Arabia. It was believed, however, that such events would be of only secondary importance, because they were unlikely to provide direct assistance to any action in Syria. The role of Arabia in any future clash between Britain and Turkey was expected to be like that of Spain in the Napoleonic wars: 'an ulcer of malignant growth', but not a decisive factor.⁴ Indeed, it would seem likely that the War Office did not even consider the Arabs of the Hejaz as so militarily formidable as those of Syria. The general opinion was that a revolt in Arabia would fail unless Turkey was already involved in fighting a European power, whereas the tribes to the east of Syria were reported as being 'constantly in revolt against the Sultan.'⁵ Moreover, the tribes of the Hejaz were said to be short of the 'material' of war but those of Syria were described as 'well armed.'⁶ The lasting influence of these prewar reports on the usefulness of

3 Reconnaissance of Syria from the coast eastwards. June 1908, WO 33/456.

4 Notes on Arabia. Jan. 1907, WO 33/429.

5 Ibid.

6 Military report on Syria and the Eastern Littoral of the Red Sea. 1906, WO 33/404.

Arab allies can be demonstrated by reference to a most revealing fact: General Robertson, who later became CIGS, was in the Intelligence Division of the War Office during this period and wrote one of these studies.⁷

Yet it was not from the Syrian Arabs that the War Office hoped to gain the greatest support of all. This was expected to come from the Druse tribes of the Hauran and Lebanon. These heretical Moslems were considered to be well trained in arms and 'more than a match' for any Arabs they met in battle.⁸ It was estimated that the Druse of the Hauran region alone could raise 10,000 men with Martini-Henry rifles who might disrupt Turkish communications and attack the railway junction at Deraa. Meanwhile, the Druse who lived in Lebanon and near Acre were expected to cover the left flank of any British advance in the vicinity of Acre.⁹ The War Office's confidence in Druse support can be traced to the events of 1861, when Britain had intervened to prevent the French from punishing these tribesmen.¹⁰ Evidence of their warlike behaviour was not lacking: in 1910 the Turks were forced to collect 21,000 troops in order to make an example of them after a series of incidents.¹¹ In addition to the Druse, the Lebanese Christians, or Maronites, were similarly expected to provide assistance to the British, though their military value was reckoned significantly lower than that of the Druse.¹²

7 Military report on Syria, op.cit.

8 Reconnaissance of Syria from the coast, op.cit. See also A. Kirkbride, An awakening (U.P. of Arabia, 1971), p.87.

9 Reconnaissance of Syria, op.cit.

10 J. T. Parfit, Among the Druzes of Lebanon and Bashan (London, 1917), pp.4-5.

11 H. V. F. Winstone, The illicit adventure (London, 1982), pp.63-65.

12 Reconnaissance of Syria, op.cit.

THE ARABS AND THE DEFENCE OF EGYPT

After Britain and France had declared war on Turkey a new dimension was almost immediately added to the Great War by the Sultan. On 14 November 191⁴ he proclaimed a Holy War against all those who were at war with Turkey and her allies; it constituted an order to all Moslems to unite against their common enemies. The Arab tribes of eastern Syria and Arabia were important objects of this declaration and if they decided to adopt a hostile attitude towards the British matters could become difficult in Egypt. There was a sense in which Egypt could be described as an island surrounded by seas of water and 'far less navigable oceans of waterless sand'; because of this fact, Arab tribesmen were of crucial import to any attack upon the country, since they could provide the necessary camels to facilitate a move across the Sinai, or deny them.¹³

Turkey's Arabian strategy involved uniting the different tribes in a very ambitious attempt to support an attack upon Egypt. There were basically four main tribal leaders whose support the Turks sought: Ibn Saud, whose territory covered the centre of Arabia and backed on to the Persian Gulf; Ibn Rashid to the north of Ibn Saud; the Sherif of Mecca to the west, whose territory stretched along the coast of the Red Sea; and Nuri Shalaan, to the north of Ibn Rashid, but, more importantly, to the east of Syria. Although all these men lived within the confines of the Ottoman Empire they often behaved as 'independent' powers, to the exasperation of their Turkish overlords and the advantage of Great Britain. Thus, Ibn Saud and other Arab chieftains around the Persian Gulf had been in close contact

¹³ Storrs, p.148.

with the British before the war, while the Sherif of Mecca's son, Prince Abdullah, negotiated on behalf of his father with Lord Kitchener in Egypt. Unfortunately for London, the most immediately useful tribe to any operations in and around Egypt, Nuri Shalaan's Anazeh, were also the least accessible.¹⁴ The Anazeh tended to be very nomadic in their habits, moving their 'capital' regularly; they also lacked the educational background of the Sherif and his family; they could not be reached by naval activity, as could Ibn Saud. British Arabian policy was therefore vitally restrained by the dictates of geography.

Fears of 'a Turco-Arabian coalition, which would... constitute a danger to Egypt' was an important motive in the decision to send a small expeditionary force to the Persian Gulf from India in September 1914.¹⁵ General Barrow at the India Office went so far as to claim that if a British army landed in Mesopotamia the impact of the action would encourage the Arabs to transfer their allegiance to London, thus making a Holy War unsuccessful while 'the support of the Arabs would utterly destroy all prospect of Turkish success... in Egypt.'¹⁶ Barrow had made specific reference to Ibn Saud, explaining that this chief had already been approached by the Turks; this was in September. Moreover, in October Enver Pasha, the leading Turkish minister, sent Ibn Saud a letter 'asking him to bring up a

¹⁴ Official History, p.209. The authors merely mention Nuri in a footnote, implying thereby that he was certainly not in the same category as the Sherif or Ibn Saud, yet he was regarded as most significant by Cairo during the war.

¹⁵ 'Mesopotamia' by Maj. Paddon 12 Sept. 1916, WO 106/898.

¹⁶ Minute by the Military Secretary, India Office 26 Sept. 1914, L/MIL/5/768.

force to Syria to assist the Turkish Government against the "English".¹⁷ Ibn Saud politely declined the request, but the enemy's intentions were becoming clear. Britain's agent in eastern Arabia, and Ibn Saud's close friend, Captain Shakespear, gleaned further information about the Turkish plan: Ibn Saud was to defend Basra, Ibn Rashid and the Anazeh were to advance on Egypt, via the Sinai, in conjunction with the Sherif of Mecca, along with the Senussi in the west. Unfortunately for Turkey, the Arabs did not play their part: 'This plan was upset by Binsaud, Sherif of Mecca and Anazeh tribe deciding to hold together, and last named joining Binsaud against Binrashid, who, then attacked, could not advance Egypt.'¹⁸ Indian Intelligence, however, did not have the full story, for Ibn Rashid actually defeated Ibn Saud in battle in January 1915 and Captain Shakespear had been killed. Britain's Arabian strategy had been dealt a serious blow, and her attention, therefore, would begin to shift away from Ibn Saud. Nevertheless, Ibn Saud had fulfilled a 'useful purpose' in distracting Ibn Rashid from Egypt at a time when General Barrow could describe the military position among the tribes as 'getting serious.'¹⁹

Turkish overtures were not confined to the greater chieftains in their search for assistance in an attack on Egypt. They recruited 'Arab irregulars' from amongst the Howeytat, Ibn Injail,

17 Lt.-Col. Grey to Political Resident in Persian Gulf 27 Oct. 1914, L/P&S/11/86/5020.

18 CGS India to W.O. 19 Jan. 1915 repeated to GOC Egypt, L/P&S/11/87/276.

19 Ibid., draft telegram, no date, no name, and note by Gen. Barrow upon letter of 21 Jan. 1915. Ibn Rashid was regarded as a nuisance rather than a threat; see minute by Under-Secretary, India Office, no date: 'As to potential danger to Egypt he is surely negligible.'

Beni Sakhr and similar smaller tribes from northern Arabia. In fact, Turkish representatives signed a treaty with the Howeytat in the third week of September, providing up to 10,000 arms for the tribesmen. With these Arabs were mixed some Kurdish horsemen, whom Egyptian Intelligence considered 'better fighters' than the Bedouin Arabs riding with them.²⁰

Given these Turkish intrigues it was hardly surprising that the Egyptian authorities took a very keen interest in all matters Arabian. A careful study of the tribes to the immediate east of Egypt was drawn up for the use of Intelligence. Written by Captain Newcombe and a certain T. E. Lawrence, it was based upon their survey of the area conducted in the spring of 1914. This report gave details of each of the tribes, their size, intentions and military capabilities.²¹ The British were not at all ignorant about the tribes in the Sinai, therefore, and although the enemy seem to have fairly successfully enlisted the tribesmen of the peninsula, even to the extent of clothing them with uniforms, this does not mean that Cairo enjoyed no success with the people of the region. Their military prowess was dismissed: they were 'absolutely useless as soldiers.'²² Moreover, during an engagement in the Sinai in November 1915 a well-known Bedouin leader in the area, Sheikh Ridalla Selim Dadur, was killed and this event had a great effect so that for a time the local Arabs did not trouble the British.²³

20 'Report re Turkish military preparations and political intrigues having an attack on Egypt as their object' by P. P. Graves 10 Nov. 1914, WO 157/689.

21 'Notes on Arabs south of Gaza, Beersheba and Dead Sea to Aqaba and east of the Sinai frontier' by Newcombe, no date, WO 157/689.

22 Summary of intelligence for the period 14 to 21 Dec. 1915, WO 157/689. The tribesmen did not want uniforms as they feared they might be enlisted for operations elsewhere, but the Turks gave modern rifles only if uniforms were worn!

23 Official History, p.72.

As it turned out, this very leader had been responsible for several mine-laying raids against the Canal: it was a fairly frequent occurrence for the Turks to utilise mixed forces of regular troops and Arab auxiliaries in the Sinai. But not all the Bedouin of the peninsula were satisfied with the Turks. For example, in December 1915 General Maxwell informed Kitchener that Hamid El Sufid Pasha of El Arish wanted to change sides because he was tired of the Turks, and he was bringing 3,000 Bedouin with him.²⁴

The soldiers tended to be most enthusiastic about Arab tribesmen if they seemed to offer the possibility of direct co-operation of some kind with a particular operation. For example, Lord Cromer had suggested as early as October 1914 that a raid of some kind might be made against the Hejaz railway in the vicinity of Maan.²⁵ The most suitable way to execute such a plan would be through an amphibious landing at Aqaba in the Sinai. Callwell in November suggested occupying Aqaba with a small force in order to encourage the local Arabs.²⁶ Early in January this idea was taken up again, for an advance from Aqaba to Maan still looked attractive to some at the War Office.²⁷ Maxwell lacked enthusiasm for such an operation, however, because he believed that it did not offer much in the way of returns for the British war-effort. One cannot but agree, since until the Arabs of the Hejaz openly declared themselves in revolt against the Turks this railway was not very important, in that its

24 Maxwell to Kitchener 31 Dec. 1915, FO 371/2668/868.

25 Memorandum by Cromer respecting the steps to be taken in event of war with Turkey 16 Oct. 1914, CAB 37/121/124.

26 Note by Callwell 28 Nov. 1914, WO 106/1469.

27 'Syria' by Capt. Skeffington-Smyth Jan. 1915, WO 106/1569.

chief strategic role was to connect Medina, where there was a strong Ottoman garrison, with Syria.²⁸

For those who advocated a landing in the vicinity of Haifa the prospect of assistance from the Maronites and Druse tribesmen seemed real enough, even to the extent of possibly producing a force of up to 20,000 rifles!²⁹ Hopes of support from the peoples of Syria, however, proved to be somewhat overoptimistic; in this area, at least, the prewar experts were incorrect. The Druse did not prove to be the asset that had been expected and Egypt began to receive reports that those of them around Lebanon would probably ride with the Turks in January.³⁰ By March it was clear that many Druse tribesmen were actually enlisting at Damascus to serve alongside Turkish troops as volunteers.³¹ Indeed, so long as there was no serious British incursion into Syria there was little chance of gaining allies from among the Druse and Maronites, for these peoples were much more vulnerable to Turkish reprisals than the nomadic Arabs to the east, whom Djemal Pasha would have to find before he could punish.

As attention in London and Egypt switched to the Alexandretta region of Syria enthusiasm for obtaining the support of local people was rekindled. For example, a detailed examination of all the different nationalities in the region was made; they included a tribe which worshipped the genital organs! Fortunately these were

28 Arthur, p.153. Maxwell to Kitchener 4 Dec. 1914.

29 'Syria' by Skeffington-Smyth, op.cit.

30 'The Lebanon' 8 Jan. 1915, WO 157/689.

31 Vice-Consul P. Abela to Consul-General Cumberbatch 11 Mar. 1915, L/P&S/91/1346.

not the only people in the area, since Kurds lived locally and were believed to be pro-British, while Armenians could provide guides although their desire to fight was not so encouraging, as they probably wished to 'pay off old scores.' Significantly, the scale of help that could be expected from these peoples was thought to be small, largely involving 'guerilla help' to any British force.³² Other evaluations in Egypt, however, were more optimistic than this, arguing that the local Armenians might be able to raise a force of 4 - 5,000 rifles, while followers of the Aga Khan in the vicinity would obey instructions issued by their leader. Yet far more was hoped for even than this:

We have been informed... that the Germans in command in Syria dread nothing so much as a landing by us in the North of Syria - they say themselves that this would be followed by a general defection of their Arab troops. There is no doubt that this fear is well-founded, and that a general Arab revolt, directed by the pan Arab military league would be the immediate result of our occupation of Alexandretta following on a defeat of the Turkish forces in the South. 33

Hopes of a defection by Turkey's Arab regular troops were to prove illusory, for Constantinople was aware of the danger and moved these men to other fronts. Indeed, many hopes were to be dashed during the coming months.

Nonetheless, information being received still appeared to give grounds for optimism about Arab action until July 1915. For example, in February McMahon actually confessed to Grey that he was concerned about a general revolt breaking out in Syria and so forcing London's hand prematurely into a permanent occupation of

32 Notes on Alexandretta: supplied by Catoni & Kennedy 20 Jan. 1915, WO 157/689.

33 Paper by Intelligence Department, Cairo 5 Jan. 1915, Clayton papers 694/3/7.

the country.³⁴ By April, moreover, there even talk of the Sherif of Mecca moving up from the Hejaz in order to 'have a hand in the conquest of Syria.'³⁵ Meanwhile, encouraging news was received of Nuri Shalaan in June; apparently he had sent word to the Arabs of the Jerusalem area, who had chosen to side with the Turks, 'pointing out to them that the part they are taking in this war is altogether against the interests of the Arabs.'³⁶ Cairo was most impressed by the importance of Nuri Shalaan in the middle of 1915; the generally accepted opinion appears to have been that if Britain intended any action in Syria then preliminary moves ought to be made 'to gain the hearts' of the nomadic Arabs and especially Nuri Shalaan's.³⁷

These encouraging reports led some to devise remarkably ambitious plans involving the use of Arab irregulars in Syria. In June, for instance, Captain Bray, an Arab expert, suggested that Damascus could be seized by an exclusively Arab force if this had been trained and organized initially by British officers, since the city was exposed to the east, a direction from which the Turks did not expect an attack. The beauty of Bray's scheme was that British prestige would not be adversely affected if the attempt failed or the occupation proved only temporary; on the other hand, any such action would be a source of 'great embarrassment' to both the Turks and Germans.³⁸ Bray's suggestions were significant, for

34 McMahon to Grey 15 Feb. 1915, FO 371/2480/23865.

35 Presented in Apr. 1915 by Syrians in Cairo, Clayton papers 694/3/41.

36 Intelligence Summary 3 June 1915, WO 157/692.

37 Intelligence Summary 12 July 1915, WO 157/693.

38 Memorandum by Capt. Bray 30 June 1915, L/P&S/11/94/2520.

they included an important point: effective Arab action could be expected only if British officers were able to train the tribesmen and Bray had recommended this being done by using officers from the campaign in Mesopotamia where direct contact with some Arabs was possible.³⁹

Unfortunately, British experience of Arab tribesmen in Mesopotamia was unfavourable and this influenced the attitudes of many to these unusual allies. What is more, when the Turks invaded Aden in 1915 the British despatched a small expeditionary force to assist the friendly Arab chief in the area only to find on arrival that this leader had decided to join the Turks. Expressing his frustration at this kind of behaviour, Callwell explained his real feelings in a letter to Henry Wilson in July: 'It is very tiresome of the Arabs that when you go out depending on them to be on your side, they turn out to be on the enemy's side - one's appreciation of the military situation then turns out to be faulty.'⁴⁰ Herein lay the true problem for the British: there existed a massive cultural chasm between nomadic Arab tribesmen who came and went as they pleased and English staff officers who expected all operations to be conducted according to a strict timetable. Ideally, of course, Cairo would have preferred the active co-operation of groups such as the Maronites or the educated urban Arabs of Syria, for they would have understood British requests - but these peoples were too much under the thumb of their Turkish masters. Moreover, it was possible for the

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Callwell to Henry Wilson 9 July 1915, Henry Wilson papers 73/1/18.

British to misinterpret information they collected as to Arab attitudes in Syria as a result; in fact, much of the disaffection amongst Syrians in the Turkish army was caused by a desire for better pay rather than revolutionary enthusiasm and many Arabs in the armed forces found security there that they had never known previously.⁴¹

THE ARABS AND THE EVACUATION OF GALLIPOLI

In October 1915 British relations with the Arabs of the Ottoman Empire seemed to have reached something of a watershed. At the Dardanelles Committee on 21 October 1915 Kitchener explained to his colleagues that if they could be assured of Arab support this would 'assist immensely' the British war-effort. At this meeting there was some talk of offering the Arabs Baghdad, which the Committee hoped might soon be captured, in order to win them over, because Grey believed they were 'at the parting of the ways whether to act with the Turks or against them.'⁴² Although mention was made of the committee of Arab officers in the Turkish army who, it was thought, 'knew what they were talking about', the British were, in fact, already in secret negotiation with a senior Arab leader, the Sherif of Mecca.

Sherif Hussein was an important figure for a number of reasons. He was the ruler of the Hejaz that contained two of Islam's holiest places, Mecca and Medina. Moreover, Hussein was descended from Mohammed himself, the founder of Islam. The geographical

⁴¹ Information from Turkish prisoners of war at Aden 23 July 1915, Sykes papers.

⁴² Dardanelles Committee meeting 21 Oct. 1915, CAB 42/4/15.

location of his territory was significant in that it included a vast expanse of the Red Sea coast past which British ships had to pass on the way to the Suez Canal, and the Hejaz railway that kept the Turkish garrisons of western Arabia in touch with Syria.⁴³ When McMahon had arrived in Egypt in January 1915 he was under instructions from the Foreign Office to foster friendship with the Sherif after Kitchener had authorised a message being sent to the ruler of the Hejaz on the day Turkey declared war on Britain in which Hussein was promised the independence of his own territory and that of the Arabs generally if he actively supported London in the conflict. Hussein had declined to declare himself openly against Turkey as early as this, but he did do Egypt a great service by refusing to support the proclamation of a Holy War, thus hugely reducing its effect. However, by the middle of 1915 he reopened negotiations and tried to extract from the High Commissioner a guarantee that Britain would support the independence of all Arab lands if they were to revolt against Turkish rule.

By October, therefore, McMahon informed London that the Sherif was unhappy with London's attitude which he felt was lukewarm, for the High Commissioner had declined to make any specific promises. Maxwell was none too happy with this state of affairs, either, for he believed Britain should encourage Hussein to act.⁴⁴ Meanwhile, at Gallipoli an Arab officer serving with the Turks, Muhammad Sharif al-Faruqi, deserted to the British. Early in October he talked with Clayton and McMahon in Egypt and told them

⁴³ For additional arguments of the Sherif's importance see G. Troeller, 'Ibn Said and Sharif Husain: a comparison in importance in the early years of the First World War', Historical Journal, XIV (1971), pp.627-33.

⁴⁴ Arthur, pp.218-9. Maxwell to Kitchener 27 Sept. 1915.

of Arab secret societies in the Turkish army, which, he claimed, were very strong. He alleged that the Turks and Germans were already negotiating with these societies, who were favourable to Britain, but wanted a definite statement of sympathy from London. Faruqi explained that the Sherif was in contact with these groups but was uneasy about the general situation and wanted tangible offers from the British. Finally, and this was the key, Faruqi admitted that if London rejected the Arabs now, or even delayed, then they would go over to the enemy. Maxwell reported these opinions to Kitchener and added his own conclusion: 'the active assistance which the Arabs would render in return for our support would be of the greatest value in Arabia and Mesopotamia, Syria and Palestine.'⁴⁵ McMahon was enthusiastic as well, telling the Foreign Office that the Arabs seemed 'ready to work actively with us, which will greatly influence the course of Mesopotamia and Syrian campaigns.'⁴⁶ A further factor added a still greater degree of urgency to the Arab question: at Gallipoli by the middle of October all was not well and the possibility of a withdrawal had been raised, so that General Hamilton asked for any assistance from Arabs in the Ottoman Empire that could be encouraged.⁴⁷ For a while there appeared to be some likelihood of this, because there were many Arab soldiers in the Turkish ranks at Gallipoli and in Mesopotamia

⁴⁵ Paraphrase GOC Egypt to Secretary of State for War, FO 371/2486/150309.

⁴⁶ McMahon to F.O. 18 Oct. 1915, FO 371/2486/153045. It is not clear what McMahon means here by the 'Syrian' campaign, unless he is thinking of a possible landing at Alexandretta.

⁴⁷ E. Kedourie, The Chatham House version and other Middle Eastern studies (London, 1970), p.14.

and Kitchener, for one, was keen to seek to win them over to the British side.⁴⁸ Speaking about these events nearly a year later McMahon gave some inkling of the pressure he had been under from the military authorities to engineer an Arab revolt: 'We had nothing to do with it; we were forced to do it at the military request, to assist Gallipoli and Mesopotamia and also as a relief for Egypt.'⁴⁹ Mention of Egypt is significant for it was thought that if the Arabs joined the Allies this would greatly decrease the importance of an attack upon the Canal in the autumn and winter of 1915.⁵⁰

And so we return to the Dardanelles Committee meeting of 21 October 1915 at which, as a result of these events, Grey authorised McMahon to make Hussein an offer of an 'independent Arabia'.⁵¹ The High Commissioner subsequently wrote to the Sherif agreeing to recognize the independence of the Arabs within certain areas and according to certain reservations that have been disputed ever since. What concerns us here is not the precise nature of these assurances, but rather the value that the British military attached to Arab assistance in the autumn and the extent to which they were prepared to go in order to obtain it.

48 Minute by Kitchener, no date, FO 371/2486/154423.

49 Conference at Ismailia 12 Sept. 1916, WQ 158/602.

50 Memorandum by Aubrey Herbert 30 Oct. 1915, MSS Eur F 112/110.

51 Dardanelles Committee meeting 21 Oct. 1915, op.cit.

Meanwhile, other developments were to emphasize still further in the minds of the men in London and Cairo the importance of the Arab factor. Any Arab movement against Turkey would involve the interests of France in Syria, so the British now considered it necessary to enter into talks with Paris to define the precise claims of both countries in the Middle East. Mark Sykes was therefore deputed to negotiate with a French diplomat, Georges Picot, and come to an agreement prior to any Arab action. Again the exact details of what later became known as the Sykes-Picot treaty do not concern us here, except to say that it divided the Middle East into a complicated series of spheres of influence, which included the claims of Russia as well as those of Britain and France. What was important about these events, so far as we are concerned, was the urgency of the situation, because London remained desperate for an agreement as soon as possible so that it could move the Arabs with French approval. This militarily dictated urgency unsettled some at the Foreign Office who believed that Picot was using this as a lever to force London to accept France's 'preposterous claims' in the region.⁵² It was in Picot's interests to play down the scale and strength of Arab nationalism, and this, in a remarkable way, actually encouraged some in London to believe even more fervently in the Arabs' potential influence. Callwell, on learning of Picot's comments, informed the Foreign Office that this movement had 'great force' and there was 'a chance... of using it as a powerful weapon against the Turks', and he knew this because he had access to information from Cairo that Paris knew

⁵² Minute by H.R.C. 11 Dec. 1915, FO 371/2486/189073.

nothing of.⁵³

With the possibility of Arab action having quite suddenly become a major issue for the strategists in London we ought not to be surprised that many now began to speculate as how best they could facilitate an Arab revolt. Although it was hoped that the Sherif possessed sufficient authority to declare a revolt, the strategists looked to Syria, not the Hejaz, for tangible Arab co-operation. Developments were anticipated in Syria in the coming months: it was thought likely that Turkish forces would soon start to move down from the Dardanelles and into Syria, with the result that any potential Arab movement must be crushed. So Wingate could state in mid-November that 'a revolt in Syria... cannot be successful without our active military co-operation.'⁵⁴ The question arose, consequently, what military co-operation would most successfully assist the Arabs.

The immediate alternatives suggested were a direct invasion by land from Egypt into Syria, an expedition to Aqaba and a landing on the Syrian coast. According to Major Gabriel, who submitted two memoranda in mid-November, an attack at Alexandretta offered the best prospect of all: from here, he argued, the southward thrust of the Turks could be halted and the Arab revolt controlled and organized.⁵⁵ Colonel Parker, who had been involved in the early negotiations with Picot before Sykes took them over, also urged

53 Note on the Arab movement by Callwell 29 Nov. 1915, FO 371/2486/189073.

54 Governor-General, Khartoum to Clayton, Cairo 15 Nov. 1915, FO 882/12/117157.

55 Memoranda by Maj. Gabriel 13 and 17 Nov. 1915, FO 371/2486/177016.

action at Alexandretta, but he recommended an initial advance into Syria by land by one division to attract any Turkish reinforcements away from northern Syria before the assault on Alexandretta took place.⁵⁶ Gertrude Bell hoped that operations at Alexandretta would enable Aleppo to be seized on behalf of the Arabs.⁵⁷ Additional emphasis was given to action at Alexandretta by the fear of Turkish moves to massacre the Christian population of Syria and so prevent any possible co-operation between these peoples and the Arab Moslems of the region.⁵⁸

Strong arguments were presented in favour of an amphibious attack on the Syrian coast to support the Arab cause, therefore. So convinced was McMahon that he told the Foreign Office on the last day of November that if no such action were taken it would 'jeopardise any attempt to secure Arab co-operation.'⁵⁹ The decision finally taken to defend Egypt along the line of the Suez Canal was extremely unpopular among those who saw potential in an Arab revolt. But they did not give up. In fact, Clayton in Egypt argued that securing the Arabs' friendship was now 'rendered more important' although it would, of course, be much harder, since their confidence in eventual British success would be seriously impaired.⁶⁰ He explained precisely why he held these views in a

56 Note on Arab movement by A. C. Parker. Covering letter 22 Nov. 1915, FO 371/2486/177016.

57 G. Bell to Lord Cromer 29 Nov. 1915, WO 79/64.

58 McMahon to Grey 28 Nov. 1915, CAB 37/138/23.

59 McMahon to F.O. 30 Nov. 1915, FO 371/2486/181834.

60 Notes by Clayton 8 Dec. 1915, FO 882/2.

letter to Colonel Parker on 10 December 1915:

I think rather too much stress has been laid on what I may call the 'positive' advantages of an alliance with the Arabs, and that the very great 'negative' advantages of denying them to the Germans and Turks have been rather overlooked. 61

As the General Staff began seriously to examine the defence of Egypt they realized that this, too, had an Arab dimension, for if the enemy could obtain sufficient camels from nomadic tribes of Arabia they might be able to cross the Sinai in force by the central or southern routes, thereby avoiding Qatia altogether. This was a most worrying possibility, and made the 'co-operation, or otherwise, of the Arab tribes with the enemy... a factor of extreme importance.'⁶²

Discussion of Arab affairs did not end with the decision to defend Egypt at the Canal, therefore. In London, moreover, Sykes gave a great boost to this subject when he was called to give evidence at the War Committee early in December. Although he argued passionately for an offensive from Egypt by land to assist the Arabs, a course of action that was extremely unlikely given the current strategic situation in the eastern Mediterranean, Sykes succeeded in getting the committee members talking of offensive action in Syria once more. He clearly impressed them with the importance and urgency of the Arab question. Perhaps most important of all, Sykes made a most significant observation about Arab nationalism: the 'spiritual fire' of this movement lay in Arabia,

61 Clayton to Parker 10 Dec. 1915, Sykes papers.

62 'Notes on the War Office Estimate of rate of Turkish movement from Constantinople to Palestine', Murray papers 79/48/3.

he argued, but the 'intellect and organizing power' lay in Syria.⁶³ From now on the British would have to rely upon this 'spiritual fire' for, by remaining at the Canal, they had forfeited any chance of exploiting the 'intellect and organizing power' of Syria.

⁶³ Evidence of M. Sykes on the Arab Question 16 Dec. 1915, CAB 42/6/10 and War Committee meeting 16 Dec. 1915, CAB 42/6/9.

CHAPTER 8

MURRAY ASSUMES COMMAND IN EGYPT: JANUARY - APRIL 1916

'And the Egyptians will I give into the hand of a cruel lord; and a fierce king shall rule over them, saith the Lord, the Lord of hosts.'

Isaiah 19 v 4

CONFUSION IN EGYPT: JANUARY - MARCH 1916

Affairs in Egypt were nothing short of chaotic early in January of 1916. Troops poured into the country from Gallipoli; and into this confused mass of soldiers, sailors and civilians came the GHQ of the MEF. ¹ In fact, the MEF had been under the impression that they would take over Egypt on arrival; but they were soon to discover otherwise. ² General Maxwell would have none of it; he claimed he had not been informed of any such scheme by London, and the War Office soon confirmed that Maxwell was to remain in command of all troops in Egypt until the arrival of General Murray. This was a far from satisfactory state of affairs for the MEF's staff since once they arrived in Egypt they - and all their troops - passed under Maxwell's control; hence, they found themselves in a position of some 'embarrassment and impotence' with their own usefulness having been reduced 'almost to zero'. ³ Such a state of affairs created a dangerous paralysis at the highest level of the MEF: 'Here in Egypt is absolute chaos, and nothing can be done until Murray arrives with definite instructions'. ⁴ Even if the MEF's staff had wanted to work they could not as they discovered with some horror that they had no furniture in the offices assigned to them. Nor did they take kindly to the atmosphere of idleness which seemed to pervade Cairo and the insensitivity to the events at the Dardanelles; for on the night of the final evacuation of the peninsula (8 January 1916) a dance was

¹ Official History, p.154, gives some idea of the great number of troops entering the country, but it fails to describe the confusion at the highest level or the condition of the men.

² Clayton to Wingate 1 Jan. 1916, Wingate papers 136/1/35.

³ W.D. GHQ MEF 1-3 Jan. 1916, W.O. 95/4360.

⁴ Brig.-Gen. Koe to Long 3 Jan. 1916, W.O. 107/22.

held at the very hotel in which the MEF's staff were staying! ⁶

The number of troops entering the country almost daily during the first six weeks of the New Year caused all sorts of problems and gave an unreal air to the Egyptian towns. It was thought there were now as many as 90 generals in the country; indeed, so prevalent did these senior officers appear to be that they had 'to be treated just like men' with the result that they were soon forming queues at tram stations, for example. ⁶ With so many different units disembarking at the same time lines of communications between their various commands could become strained; and this is what happened, for India lost contact with the GOC of its own troops in Egypt and had to ask Maxwell for help to contact him! ⁷ Even if troops were landed in Egypt according to orders (while still in contact with their GHQ) problems could arise. One Indian unit, for instance, unloaded its men minus their kits, because these had been badly loaded and to unpack them would waste too much time as the ships were on their way to Basra. ⁸ Events like these were not conducive to administrative efficiency or swift reorganisation; in fact, the MEF was still further handicapped by its complete ignorance of Egyptian peculiarities and consequently found itself swamped by paper work. ⁹

But there was a still more serious problem arising in Egypt - lack of food. By the end of January the MEF was 'living rather from hand to mouth' and soon discovered that it was short of bread and hay. ¹⁰

⁶ 4 & 8 Jan. 1916, W.O. 95/4360.

⁶ J. de V. Loder to Father 4 Feb. 1916, Loder papers. Note 10 Jan. 1916, Wingate papers 136/1/63.

⁷ C in C India to GOC Egypt 21 Jan. 1916, L/MIL/17/5/3908.

⁸ Adjutant General in India to GOC, Force 'D' 31 Dec. 1915, L/MIL/17/5/3908.

⁹ Clayton to Wingate 17 Jan. 1916, Wingate papers 136/1/96. GHQ MEF 3 Feb. 1916, W.O. 95/4361.

¹⁰ Brig.-Gen. F. Koe to Director of Supplies and Transport, War Office 25 Jan. 1916, W.O. 107/22.

So serious did the situation become that the military authorities in Egypt had to order massive shipments of food from India in March because existing facilities in Egypt simply could not cope with the influx of fighting troops from the Dardanelles. ¹¹

Into this 'maelstrom' came Murray on 8 January 1916 and he succeeded to command of the M E F two days later. ¹² Although his arrival sent a sigh of relief through the MEF staff it did not end the existing confusion automatically. For one thing, Murray found he had no GHQ to stay at and was forced to accept the hospitality of the High Commissioner until he could establish his GHQ about two miles from Ismailia in a French hospital on the Suez Canal on 22 January. ¹³

Murray reached Egypt armed with instructions intended to outline precisely what his role was to be; this was precisely what they did not do! Sir Archibald himself later described his instructions as 'considerably indefinite', which is a most interesting criticism since he actually drafted them himself under the close supervision of Lord Kitchener, and in the face of the opposition of the CIGS who still believed they were unworkable in practice. ¹⁴ The Secretary of State's instructions placed Murray in command of the troops assembling and refitting in Egypt and made him responsible for the safety of the Suez Canal. Their fatal flaw lay in the arrangements to be made with General Maxwell and the already existing Force in Egypt: Murray was 'to make his own arrangements' with

¹¹ CGS India to G.O.A. L.B., Cairo 18 Mar. 1916, L/MIL/17/5/3910.

¹² Murray diary 8 & 10 Jan. 1916. The Official History (p.95) incorrectly gives the date of his arrival as 9 Jan. 1916.

¹³ McMahon to Grey 11 Jan. 1916, FO 800/48.

¹⁴ Lecture by Murray at Aldershot 23 Feb. 1932, Murray papers 79/48/3. Robertson to Altham 10 Jan. 1916, Robertson papers I/35/3. Robertson to Edmonds 29 Dec. 1925, CAB 45/80.

Sir John as to which troops were to remain under the Force in Egypt's supervision and as to the line of demarcation between the two forces.

¹⁵ In fact, matters were potentially still more complex even than this, as Egypt actually contained a third command, the Levant Base; however, in this area at least the instructions were clear - General Altham and his command were to come under Murray's jurisdiction.

A scheme such as this which envisaged a dual command in Egypt could only have worked at all if there had existed a surfeit of goodwill between the two generals concerned. Unfortunately, this was not the case. Maxwell was furious that everyone else in Egypt seemed to have been informed of the new scheme except himself and he felt that because Murray was to be independent he ought to resign. ¹⁶ This was hardly an auspicious start - and things soon deteriorated. Maxwell complained to all his friends: he told Wingate that he was 'very hurt' at the way he had been treated, while to General Rawlinson he allowed some of his bitterness towards Murray to emerge: 'I am in a back wash. Murray has for some occult reason been sent here to take the bread out of my mouth.' ¹⁷ These personal feelings - smouldering below the surface for the present - would soon erupt and make any co-operation between the two men almost impossible. But for the moment all seemed tranquil officially. On 12 January the two men held a conference and outlined the precise details of their respective spheres of command apparently without any friction. ¹⁸ Murray was obviously pleased with the results of this conference for two days later he informed Robertson that he now had a 'satisfactory division of responsibility' with Maxwell. ¹⁹ In fact, he had 'shown every

¹⁵ Official History, p. 95.

¹⁶ Arthur, p. 239.

¹⁷ Maxwell to Wingate 22 Jan 1916, Wingate papers 199/1/135.

¹⁸ 'Extract from Proceedings of Conference held on 12 Jan. 1916', W.O. 158/601.

¹⁹ Chief Medforce to CIGS 14 Jan. 1916, W.O. 95/4360.

desire to meet Maxwell's wishes', according to McMahon; but a further fly was about to make itself felt in the ointment. Maxwell refused to accept the agreement already drawn up because Murray had been awarded the temporary rank of full General, thus making him senior to Maxwell, and it was only when McMahon managed to gain a similar concession for Sir John that the agreement was again operational. ²⁰

Although Maxwell did not realise it he was in fact using up the last vestiges of support that existed for him in London by these disruptive tactics. Kitchener had wanted to keep him in Egypt to guide the country through a difficult time by making use of his great experience of Egyptian idiosyncrasies and in this argument he had been supported by Grey, and McMahon in Egypt. ²¹ However, the High Commissioner had become exasperated by Maxwell's behaviour compared to that of the more dignified Murray - and he reported this to Grey. More serious still for Sir John was the attitude of Kitchener, which had begun to change, as Robertson explained to Murray: 'Between ourselves Lord K. is about tired of Maxwell and if there is any more bother there may be a change.' ²²

More trouble there certainly was. Although the CIGS had told Murray that 'if anyone can make it a go you will' it soon became clear the dual command of Egypt could not function with one of the two commanders actively frustrating the arrangement. ²³ Maxwell caused friction between the two men by trying to hold on to control of the 53rd and 54th Divisions even though the CIGS made it clear to him that these were to be released to Murray when he requested them. ²⁴ In the words of the MEF's War Diary, this proved that he was 'anxious to keep as many troops under his own control as possible and very loath

²⁰ McMahon to Grey 15 Jan. 1916 and Grey to McMahon 18 Jan 1916, FO 800/48.

²¹ Robertson to Altham 10 Jan. 1916, Robertson papers I/35/3.

²² Robertson to Murray 26 Jan 1916, BM Add. MS 52461.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Chief London to Chief Superflux 12 Feb. 1916, W.O. 95/4361.

to give them up once he has got them.' ²⁵ Meanwhile, with two commanders and two staffs in the country farcical situations could arise; as, for example, the soldier who was assigned to a base depot by the MEF which, for matters of discipline alone, was under the Force in Egypt, so that when the man committed a crime he was tried by Maxwell's men but committed to a prison administered by the MEF on the order of Sir John himself! ²⁶ The ironies of the situation were not lost upon the troops themselves and some of them even committed their opinions to paper in the form of verse - a fact of which Robertson was aware because he showed Bonar Law a mock creed parodying the position of the three generals in Egypt, Murray, Maxwell and Altham:

So Maxwell is GOC, Murray is GOC and Altham is GOC. And yet there cannot be three GOC's but one GOC. So likewise Maxwell is boss, Murray is boss and Altham is boss... for Murray descended into Alexandria: rose again the second day with a disordered brain: he ascended into Cairo: he sitteth on the top of Maxwell hitherto GOC almighty: whence he shall come to take troops, the trained and the untrained. ²⁷

Clearly the structure of command in Egypt was causing the generals to lose the respect of their men - an intolerable state of affairs.

Maxwell was not averse to complaining to the CIGS of the problems he faced in Egypt; but Murray, a politer and more cultured man, was more restrained and tried to give the impression that matters could be successfully sorted out. ²⁸ Robertson, who had never liked the arrangement, was especially concerned about what might happen if there was any serious fighting with the Turks at the Canal: 'I am horrified

²⁵ 14 Feb. 1916, W.O. 95/4361.

²⁶ Murray to Maxwell 21 Feb. 1916, BM Add. MS 52461.

²⁷ Robertson to Bonar Law 24 Feb. 1916, Bonar Law papers 52/3/25.

²⁸ Maxwell to Robertson 8 Feb. 1916, Robertson papers I/35/85.
Murray to Robertson 7 Feb. 1916, BM Add. MS 52461.

as to the idea of what might happen in that event.' ²⁹ He therefore asked both men for their opinions as to the suitability of the arrangement and was pleased to receive the desired response: the current situation was not acceptable. ³⁰ Suitably strengthened by the opinions of both generals the CIGS was able to abolish the dual command system in Egypt and General Murray took over as the commander of all troops in the country. This change brought with it a number of further reorganisations: the MEF and the Force in Egypt were renamed the Egyptian Expeditionary Force, while the Levant Base soon ceased to exist and General Altham became the EEF's Inspector General of Communications. It had been hoped to appoint Brigadier-General Asser to Murray's HQ to work alongside McMahon and be responsible for internal affairs and the supervision of martial law. However Asser was not available so Kitchener suggested Lieutenant-Colonel Clayton. ³¹ Murray and McMahon agreed to the appointment of Clayton; but in so doing they made a serious error that would cause increasing trouble in the future. It was not that Clayton was unsuitable for the job; the problem was that he now had far too many responsibilities and soon found himself dangerously over-worked because of this additional burden. ³² This was far more serious than it at first appeared, for Murray's command was now enormous and he would rely heavily upon those who clearly had experience of the internal workings of Egypt. A tension existed, therefore, between the demands of the

²⁹ Robertson to Maxwell 21 Feb. 1916, Robertson papers I/35/86.

³⁰ Draft letter by Robertson to Murray and Maxwell 24 Feb. 1916, Robertson papers I/32/6/1. Official History (p.96) gives the impression relations between the two generals were good and seems to suggest that dual command was ended because of administrative difficulties when, in fact, Robertson's real concern was the defence of Egypt in the east.

³¹ F.O. to McMahon 7 Mar. 1916 and F.O. to McMahon 13 Mar. 1916, FO 800/48.

³² Clayton to Wingate 31 Mar. 1916, Wingate papers 136/3/92. Clayton had a remarkable number of additional responsibilities: head of Political Intelligence, liaison with staff of Naval C in C, Wingate's representative in Egypt, and he even supervised the Arab Bureau.

administration of Egypt and Murray's desire to prosecute matters vigorously on his eastern front. However, at this stage he had little inclination to be involved in Egyptian politics and saw his role as quite distinct: 'Whoever commands in Egypt should, during war, live and command from outside Cairo, where he can be in touch with his fighting troops.' ⁹³ Clayton, whose office was in Cairo, therefore, had to travel to the EEF GHQ at Ismailia once a week in order to brief Sir Archibald, which was hardly an ideal state of affairs for either of them. ⁹⁴ For the moment this arrangement just about worked, but when hostilities opened on the eastern front once again it would start to fall apart and force the C in C to make further changes.

When Murray was made the sole commander of Egypt he inherited the direction of the campaign against the Senussi on the western frontier. Although we are not here concerned with the events in the Western Desert in any detail they deserve mention, since they added significantly to the C in C's already onerous burdens. In fact, he later described the campaign in the following terms: 'Though it was never realised at home, I am quite sure that in 1916 the Senussi problem was equally, if not more, important than the Turkish problem in Sinai.' ⁹⁵ Murray soon discovered that he had to acquaint himself with affairs in the Western Desert and issue orders to his forces there - forces which, of course, had previously been under Maxwell's exclusive control. On 23 March 1916, therefore, he had a conference with the officers concerned at Cairo to outline future policy against the Senussi. ⁹⁶ This, in itself, was significant; the campaign in the Western Desert would draw Murray away from the eastern front and make his job still more complicated as he sought to prosecute an energetic advance in the Sinai. In fact, when the EEF fought its first serious engagement in the Sinai at Qatia in April the C in C

⁹³ Murray to Robertson 29 Feb. 1916, Robertson papers I/32/8.

⁹⁴ Clayton to Wingate 31 Mar. 1916, Wingate papers 136/3/93.

⁹⁵ Aldershot lecture by Murray, op.cit.

⁹⁶ Notes on a visit to Cairo on 23 Mar. 1916, W.O. 95/4361.

was actually on the western front inspecting his men and had to dash back across Egypt. ³⁷ While the campaign against the Senussi continued to demand attention even into 1917 affairs in the Sudan caused concern to the British and forced Murray to consider them also. ³⁸

A further demand upon Sir Archibald's attention was made by the British forces at Salonica. Kitchener's instructions allocated Murray 'general supervision' of these troops; but as to exactly what this meant nobody was quite sure. ³⁹ Murray may, in fact, have been under the impression that he was expected to take full command in Greece, for while he was in transit to Egypt from London he actually telegraphed the War Office about sending additional troops to Salonica. ⁴⁰ However, matters were soon to crystalise. On 9 January Murray was informed that General Sarraill would command the British force in Greece operationally; Egypt's role would be purely administrative. ⁴¹ Nevertheless, the administrative supervision of any campaign is onerous, especially if it is removed from the officiating GHQ by the Mediterranean! Salonica was no exception and Murray later commented that this extra burden on his staff was 'extremely heavy'. ⁴² Nor were matters greatly facilitated by some confusion over telegrams between Egypt and Salonica. ⁴³ Murray's involvement with administrative matters in Macedonia lasted until September 1916 when the campaign there finally became independent.

³⁷ Murray diary 23 & 24 Apr. 1916.

³⁸ Notes on a visit to Cairo on 23 Mar. 1916, op.cit.

³⁹ Official History, p.95.

⁴⁰ 2 Jan. 1916, W.O. 95/4360.

⁴¹ Chief London to Gen. Mahon 10 Jan. 1916, W.O. 95/4360.

⁴² A. Murray, Sir Archibald Murray's despatches (London, 1920), First Despatch. 1 June 1916, p.30.

⁴³ Chief Medforce to Chief Salonica 12 Feb. 1916, W.O. 95/4361. Gen. Mahon in Salonica was instructed to repeat all his telegrams to London to Egypt, but he did not always do this.

MURRAY RESTORES ORDER

Along with the instructions signed by Lord Kitchener General Murray also brought an additional set penned by the CIGS. Robertson explained that Murray was to regard his forces as 'a general strategical reserve for the Empire' since it was still not clear exactly where the Turks might strike next; however, he reminded his colleague that France was still the main theatre of war, so that once the situation in the east had been cleared up after the confusion of the evacuation of the Dardanelles, no more troops should be retained in Egypt than would be 'absolutely necessary'. In the meantime, he was to reorganise and refit all the troops in Egypt and prepare them for the field. ⁴⁴ These instructions were almost the very first piece of staff work drawn up by the new CIGS and reflect his determination to extend his authority over military affairs generally; in fact, he demanded a daily communiqué from Murray each evening 'whether there is anything special to report or not' and rounded off the whole memorandum in the following terms: 'All communications regarding military operations... should be addressed to me.' ⁴⁵ Robertson's instructions were not in the least bit ambiguous, therefore, unlike those by Kitchener. Murray could be in no doubt as to what was expected of him, consequently, and he promptly got on with the job with a great deal of success.

In many ways Murray was regarded as an ideal choice for this new job. He was considered to be an excellent trainer of men and arrived in Egypt preceded by his reputation as a 'brilliant' soldier; indeed, one can detect in the reaction to his arrival amongst some of the men in Egypt a certain degree of awe at the presence of this man

⁴⁴ Supplementary Instructions to Sir A. Murray from Sir W. Robertson 29 Dec. 1916⁵ Official History, pp. 99-100.

⁴⁵ Instructions to Murray 31 Nov. 1916, Murray papers 79/48/3. This would appear to be the final version of the text quoted in the Official History and it includes orders that are not present in the Official History's version.

who only recently had been at the head of British military planning.

⁴⁶ Meanwhile, the enemy certainly saw his appointment as a very wise attempt to sort out the confusion in Egypt:

A strong arm was needed to restore order and to put an end to the present state of affairs... General Murray is famous for his strictness and military spirit. Whether even he will be able to cleanse the Augean stable is doubtful. ⁴⁷

Murray set about his huge task with energy and enthusiasm. On only 20 January 1916 he issued orders that set the tone of his command in Egypt:

he [Murray] trusts that everyone will... be so fully employed in training himself for war that the sight of large numbers of officers and men walking about the streets and sitting about in hotels and cafés all hours of the day with apparently nothing to do will be a thing of the past. ⁴⁸

Murray combined strict orders with a vigorous series of inspections throughout Egypt designed to stimulate his troops. ⁴⁹ Nor did he stop at only orders and inspections in his determination to sort out the chaos in Egypt; he took action of a most definite nature - attendance at the races was prohibited for British military personnel and the hotels in Cairo were cleared of inactive officers. ⁵⁰ Although he was a staff officer himself, Murray was especially severe on any of his units that had a surplus of such officers and instituted an examination as to their employment. ⁵¹ It is hard for us looking

⁴⁶ Derby to Bonar Law 1 Oct. 1917, Bonar Law papers 82/5/1. Elgood, p.229.

⁴⁷ Extract from 'Daily Review of the Foreign Press' 1 Apr. 1916. From 'Krieg Zeitung', Murray papers 79/48/3.

⁴⁸ GHQ, MEF to GOC all Army Corps. 20 Jan. 1916, W.O. 95/4360.

⁴⁹ Murray diary 31 Jan. - 3 Feb. 1916.

⁵⁰ Loder to Father 29 July 1916, BM Add. MS 52461.

⁵¹ Murray to Robertson 15 Apr. 1916, Robertson papers I/32/20.

back upon these events to understand the kind of impact that Sir Archibald had upon Egypt in the early months of 1916 - but an impact he certainly did have and it was something like General Allenby's when he first arrived in the same country in June 1917. Indeed, Murray's own contemporaries were quite clear as to his achievements, Robertson, not a man given to hyperbole, expressed his admiration in the middle of February in the following glowing terms: 'You are simply doing wonders, and in a few weeks all will be well I am sure. It is a very good thing you were sent out.' ⁵² Nor was the CIGS alone in noticing these attainments. Lloyd George praised Murray to the War Committee for the way in which the 'slack state of affairs' in Egypt had been 'improved' under his leadership. ⁵³

In his reorganisation of the troops massing in Egypt Murray soon discovered that some units could not be treated with the sort of thoroughness he would have liked because of imperial politics. The ex-CIGS had a significant number of Australian and New Zealand troops under his command early in 1916 and his experiences of these men led him to adopt a somewhat ambiguous opinion as to their value: 'Their magnificent physique and inherent soldierly qualities were... greatly marred by their indiscipline and resentment of authority.' ⁵⁴ Indiscipline there certainly was; this was one reason for Murray's decision to move the Australian troops then in Cairo out to a camp at Tel el Kebir, since such a move would decrease the spread of venereal disease amongst the men caused by their contact with Egyptian prostitutes; in fact there was also talk of a more serious infection amongst the troops ^{of} cerebro-spinal-meningitis, which, it was thought, might be more easily contracted in a city. ⁵⁵ The population of Cairo breathed a sigh of relief when the Australians left; they had come to regard these soldiers as 'a kind of wild beast and only

⁵² Robertson to Murray 16 Feb. 1916, Robertson papers I/32/3.

⁵³ War Committee meeting 11 July 1916, CAB 42/16/5.

⁵⁴ Murray to Editor, 'The Times' 1 Apr. 1937, Murray papers 79/48/4.

⁵⁵ Murray to Force in Egypt 20 Jan. 1916 and Memorandum by N.R. House, Director of Medical Services 16 Jan. 1916, W.O. 95/4360.

partially human' - but they were not alone in their utter failure to comprehend or control these men for, as one observer admitted: 'Nobody knows in the least how to deal with them, their own officers included.' ⁵⁶

Because Murray was so determined to enforce strict discipline upon the men under his command it is hardly surprising that he became an unpopular figure with the Australians - a fact which is reflected in the many Australian accounts of this period. Nevertheless, his methods were undoubtedly justified and absolutely necessary if the Australian and New Zealand troops were to be prepared for further action. Murray was determined not only to enforce military discipline amongst these men, but also to reorganise their units, ^{because} Egypt was receiving so many Australian troops that these could not be absorbed into existing units; on the other hand, they needed to be assigned to formations 'with the least possible delay, both for reasons of discipline and training'. He had spoken to General Birdwood and they had agreed that with the extra troops two new Australian divisions should be formed. ⁵⁷ Robertson, in London, viewed these developments with some concern and he impressed upon Murray that he did not want an Australian Army formed just yet, but wanted something 'more flexible'. As a loyal subordinate the new Chief of the MEF agreed not to raise this subject himself and only passed on to Birdwood Robertson's promise that he would consider the subject of an army in the future. ⁵⁸ In fact, Murray went out of his way not to offend Australian susceptibilities by showing Birdwood the contents of this very letter from the CIGS. ⁵⁹ Murray was dependent upon Birdwood for any contact with the Australian Government at this stage and he had agreed to allow Birdwood to negotiate the matter of the two new divisions on his behalf. He need not have

⁵⁶ Loder to Mother 29 Feb. 1916, Loder papers.

⁵⁷ Chief Medforce to Chief London 21 Jan. 1916, W.O. 95/4360.

⁵⁸ Robertson to Murray 26 Jan. 1916 and Murray to Robertson no date, BM Add. MS 52461.

⁵⁹ Birdwood to Fitzgerald 7 Feb. 1916, PRO 30/57/64.

worried, for he was soon informed of their agreement. ⁶⁰ But New Zealand did not always fit in with the wishes of Australia and Sir Archibald began to experience the problems of dealing with two separate governments (in addition to that of London) and Wellington demanded new information before it would sanction the formation of two more Australian divisions. ⁶¹ Meanwhile, it was agreed to place Birdwood in general administrative control of all the Australian troops and to appoint him commander of the first ANZAC Corps, with General Godley to have the second. ⁶² However, even these steps could not be taken for granted. Robertson telegraphed Egypt and explained that Godley was not popular with the Australian authorities and since their Prime Minister was at that very moment in London the timing was all wrong for such an appointment. Murray was not overjoyed by this turn of affairs; he considered Godley to have done well and believed that the whole matter was one of internal politics. In fact, Godley was close to Wellington and since there was a certain degree of jealousy between the two governments this was not a popular position. ⁶³

Birdwood was not fully satisfied with all that had happened; he still cherished hopes of an Australian Army and he now started to push for an Australian Army HQ in London. ⁶⁴ Birdwood had expressed his fear that Murray intended to seize control of the Australian and New Zealand troops in Egypt. This was precisely what Murray hoped for when Birdwood went to France with the First ANZAC Corps in March thus enabling Egypt to deal directly with the Australian and New Zealand governments and not via an intermediary. ⁶⁵ Birdwood objected to this and sought to retain control of the Australian troops in Egypt which led Murray to express some exasperation at the General's behaviour: 'He wants to remain at the end of the war

⁶⁰ Murray diary 4 Feb. 1916.

⁶¹ Trooper to Chief Medforce 5 Feb. 1916, W.O. 95/4361.

⁶² Chief Medforce 8 Feb. 1916, W.O. 95/4361.

⁶³ Robertson to Murray 7 Mar. 1916. Murray to Robertson 9 Mar. 1916, W.O. 95/4361.

⁶⁴ Birdwood to Fitzgerald 17 Mar. 1916, PRO 30/57/64.

⁶⁵ 14 Mar. 1916. 21 Mar. 1916, W.O. 95/4361.

everything to Australia and New Zealand if he can gather it out of Godley's hands.' ⁶⁶ Indeed, the whole affair had created a certain air of distrust between Murray and the Australians. He was now extremely suspicious of Birdwood's motives - a feeling that lasted deep into 1916 so that in August we find him complaining to the CIGS: 'I have indisputable proof that Birdwood has been trying to get GHQ in France to agitate to have some of my ANZAC Mounted Division reinforcements sent to France.' ⁶⁷ Personal animosity and distrust of this kind inflamed an already extremely complex and sensitive matter - and Murray was to experience further problems with the Australian authorities and troops in spite of his realisation that they needed 'peculiar handling' by a general 'full of tact.' ⁶⁸

Reorganisation, training and re-fitting of the disparate bodies in Egypt was not Murray's only role in the first months of 1916. His instructions also clearly laid out that he was to retain no more men in the country than was absolutely necessary - and this was precisely what he set out to do. Even if he had not been especially enthusiastic about this aspect of his new job the CIGS left him in no doubt as to its urgency. As early as 9 February Robertson instructed his subordinate to forecast which six divisions he could transfer if needed since it was hoped some of them might be ready in March. ⁶⁹ It is hardly surprising that the CIGS was so concerned about getting men moved from Egypt, for there were between three and four hundred thousand troops in the country - a fact which did not escape the notice of Britain's allies, thereby causing Robertson some embarrassment. ⁷⁰ There has been much criticism of this concentration

⁶⁶ Murray to Robertson 23 Mar. 1916, BM Add. MS 52462.

⁶⁷ Chief Egyptforce to Chief London 22 Aug. 1916, W.O. 95/4365.

⁶⁸ Egypt to CIGS 21 Oct. 1916, W.O. 33/905.

⁶⁹ Gen. Robertson to Gen. Murray 9 Feb. 1916, W.O. 95/4361.

⁷⁰ Loder to Mother 26 Mar. 1916; Henry Wilson diary 7 Apr. 1916.

of forces in Egypt, but we need to remember the positive benefits of such a policy; it enabled Egypt to be used as a 'remarkable centre' from where debilitated troops could be recouped and then redistributed to 'the corners of the world' and 'my general reserve', as Robertson called it, actually did work, so that when pressure began to build up at Verdun and the French started to cry out for greater British efforts on the Western front, he could promise five divisions from Egypt. ⁷¹

Robertson and Murray certainly could not be criticised for holding men in Egypt for too long or of taking an over-cautious attitude toward the security of that country; on the contrary, both remained committed to the demands of France, and when Murray learnt of London's need for men he reassured the CIGS that he would 'spare... every man from here... even if we have to run some risks.' ⁷² This was no idle promise by Murray; Robertson soon expressed his delight at the way in which Egypt kept sending men home - but the EEF's staff were not nearly so pleased by this kind of loyalty, for they were aware of the true extent to which Murray really was risking things in Egypt. ⁷³ Clayton, for example, complained that men were leaving the country so rapidly that the number would soon be down to the 'irreducible minimum' needed for the internal security of a country containing many potential spies and enemy agents. ⁷⁴ Indeed, Murray himself became concerned about this problem and even feared a crisis in Egypt similar to that of the current troubles in Ireland. ⁷⁵ And yet, loyal to his friend and colleague in London, the Chief of the EEF

Robertson to Murray 15 Mar. 1916, Robertson papers I/32/12.

⁷¹ G. MacMunn, Behind the scenes in many wars (London, 1930), p. 202. /

⁷² Murray to Robertson 26 Mar 1916, Robertson papers I/32/16.

⁷³ Robertson to Murray 3 May 1916, Robertson papers I/32/24.

⁷⁴ Clayton to Wingate 29 May 1916, Wingate papers 136/6/153.

⁷⁵ Murray to Robertson 26 May 1916, Robertson papers I/32/29.

continued to despatch troops to France so that by July over 232,000 men had been sent to other theatres - a remarkable achievement and one that lends force to the argument that attention should be given to the speed with which soldiers were moved from Egypt rather than⁷⁶ the huge numbers stationed there. In fact, of the fourteen divisions that were formed in Egypt, six had gone before the end of April and another four had left by the end of June; and it should be remembered divisions were taken according to their value, so that the best troops were denied to Murray, who found himself left with only four Territorial divisions. ⁷⁶ So well had Murray done his job of clearing Egypt that he became worried about his own future in the country, expecting to be replaced and sent home with some of his men. Robertson, however, would have none of this and reassured him as to the security of his position early in June: 'I must again repeat how glad I am to have you in Egypt. We feel that matters have improved enormously since you went there and we are gradually beginning to find out how we really stand.' ⁷⁷

But Murray had correctly ascertained that by June the command in Egypt had reached the end of a phase; its role as a strategic reserve for the empire was over, and from on now most of its attention would be fixed upon the Sinai.

⁷⁶ Murray Despatches. 4th Despatch, 28 June 1917, p.136. Official History, pp.97-98.

⁷⁷ Murray to Robertson 6 June 1916, Robertson papers I/32/31 and Robertson to Murray 7 June 1916, Robertson papers I/32/33.

DEFENDING EGYPT IN EARLY 1916

Robertson's instructions for Murray had, as we have already seen, made it clear that Egypt lay very much within the overall make-up of imperial strategy and the large numbers of men in the country accentuated the importance of Egypt to the Allied cause. Consequently, Egypt was discussed at some length in London in the early days of 1916. The attraction of the subject was simply the sheer number of men in the country which, it was felt, might be used offensively in the east before they had to be returned to France. This was the way Balfour's mind started to work at the War Committee; he felt Britain needed 'a great success' in Egypt and believed that it was possible to 'reconcile vigorous action in the East in the early spring, and a sufficiency of men for operations on the Western Front'. Balfour received some support from Lloyd George who wanted the military to 'sit tight' in France and take the offensive in either Egypt, Mesopotamia or Salonica. ⁷⁸ Balfour had outlined his thoughts in more detail in a memorandum dated 27 December 1915; in it he deprecated a merely passive defence of Egypt since this would allow the Turks to bring troops through Syria and so massacre the Syrian Christians and bring the Arabs to heel; his answer was to keep sufficient forces in the country to 'smash' its enemy. ⁷⁹ Nor was Balfour the only man thinking along these lines in London, for Mark Sykes saw the large forces in Egypt as a tremendous asset for Britain's position in the East: 'At present our best political and military assets of an Oriental kind lie in Egypt, where a large army maintains our prestige and causes us to be regarded as potential aggressors.' ⁸⁰ Sykes wanted a Viceroy appointed in Egypt to co-ordinate British policy at every level for the MEF, Mesopotamia, Egypt and Arabia and to ease co-operation with her Allies in the region. In fact, he believed that the concentration in Egypt was already

⁷⁸ War Committee meeting 13 Jan. 1916, CAB 42/7/5.

⁷⁹ Memorandum by Balfour 27 Dec. 1915, CAB 42/7/5.

⁸⁰ Memorandum by Sykes 30 Jan 1916, Esher papers ESHR 4/6.

having an impact in the region and he was under the impression that the secret negotiations he was then engaged upon with the French were the prelude to a military offensive into Syria from Egypt. ^{¶1}

Unfortunately, those advocates of an offensive from Egypt in London were to be frustrated by military practicalities and the demands of other fronts. As far as Kitchener was concerned, for example, Balfour's plan to shift troops across the Mediterranean was totally impracticable, for it failed to take account of the inadequate shipping available and the enormity of the task envisaged, as he explained: 'Again, the First Lord does not seem to realise the amount of time required to re-equip the troops, to transport them from Egypt to France, and to prepare an attack on a great scale.' ^{¶2}

And if Balfour had seen the scenes of chaos that greeted Murray's arrival in Egypt it is almost certain he would not have advocated plans that - unbeknown to him at the time - were quite impracticable.

Other factors also militated against the offensive use of the troops in Egypt. The very nature of Robertson's policy of an imperial strategic reserve meant that Egypt only had temporary use of the men within its frontiers; and these same men could be removed from the country with astonishing rapidity. We have already seen how the crisis at Verdun caused the CIGS to call upon Murray's troops almost immediately - and Verdun was not the only crisis facing the Allies in the early months of 1916. At the meeting of the War Committee on 26 January, for instance, Chamberlain, and then Balfour, both pushed for troops to be sent to Mesopotamia from Egypt in the

^{¶1} R. Adelson, Mark Sykes: portrait of an amateur (London, 1975), p. 202.

^{¶2} Note by Secretary of State for War 8 Jan. 1916, CAB 42/7/5.

light of the need to defend Kut after the pyrrhic victory at Ctesiphon. 93 The 13th Division was actually despatched to Mesopotamia from Egypt on 15 February, but only after it had been re-fitted and inspected to everyone's satisfaction in Egypt - a quite superb piece of organisation done under 'exceptional stress'. 94 India was also in need of troops; at the War Committee on the very last day of February the decision was taken to designate two divisions for transfer to the Subcontinent 'in the event of a general rising on the frontier accompanied by hostilities on the part of Afghanistan'. 95 These divisions were never actually shipped to India, for the demands of the Western Front soon swallowed them, but the subject was raised again in April and once again it was affirmed that two divisions were 'earmarked' for India. 96 Since an offensive was not possible attention inevitably switched to the Canal front in Egypt.

Kitchener's instructions to Murray had made it clear that the security of Egypt was to be a priority for the new commander, and the most immediate way in which he could perform this duty was by completing the defensive works already started by General Maxwell. Although the official account leads us to believe that the work upon the Canal Defences was 'fast progressing' when Sir Archibald took them under his charge this is not the impression one receives from the contemporary accounts. 97 On 26 January, two days after the MEF took over the Canal Defences, Murray inspected some of the positions and confided to his diary a damning indictment of the work already done in these words: 'very backward' 98 He therefore threw himself into a frantic attempt to finish what had been started and modify what he disliked. In order to hasten the work he embarked upon a rigorous programme of personal tours of inspection which he greatly enjoyed:

93 War Committee meeting 26 Jan. 1916, CAB 42/7/13.

94 C.E. Callwell, The life of Sir Stanley Maude (London, 1920), pp.192-194. Murray diary 14 Feb. 1916.

95 War Committee meeting 29 Feb. 1916, CAB 42/9/7.

96 War Committee meeting 7 April 1916, CAB 42/12/7.

97 Official History, p.155.

98 Murray Diary 26 Jan. 1916.

'This long eastern front wants a soldier, and an active one. I am in the desert on an average three or four hours a day, much to the benefit of my health and, I think, the defences.' 89

Much of Murray's travelling about the Canal was done, not in a staff car, but in the saddle: 'I have never been so fit in my life as I am now', was his comment upon this aspect of his work. 90 He combined these lightning tours with a series of orders designed to pass on to his officers the need for urgency. In his enthusiasm he may have expected a little too much from some of his subordinates, but he certainly instilled a fresh sense of energy into the proceedings. 91

Of course there were still many problems. It was no easy job to build trenches in the sand of Sinai and nobody quite realised what it meant to support troops in such conditions beyond the immediate vicinity of the Canal - but these were difficulties that could be overcome given time and the luxury of an absent enemy; having solved these problems, moreover, Murray and his staff would be able to move their men into the heart of Sinai some months later. 92

Although Murray inherited the scheme of defence instituted by Maxwell he nevertheless stamped his own personality very firmly upon it and was not afraid to make changes where changes were needed. He divided the Canal Defences into three sections and made sure each section reported to GHQ daily. 93 As to the actual siting of the defensive works themselves he was concerned lest the experiences of the Western Front led to undue emphasis upon concealment and entrenchment, thus obscuring the opportunity 'for inflicting the greatest loss on an advancing enemy, and for supporting an active

89 Murray to Robertson 29 Feb. 1916, Robertson papers I/32/8.

90 Murray to Robertson 21 Feb. 1916, Robertson papers I/32/5.

91 Brig.-Gen. Koe to Director of Supplies W.O. 24 Jan. 1916. Murray clearly was not 'a very tired man' as the Australian Official History (p.335) claims about this period of his command.

92 Report of Engineer Works in Egypt, Murray papers 79/48/2.

93 Force Order No.3 by Murray 27 Jan. 1916, Murray papers 79/48/3.

defence'. ⁹⁴ Murray remained dissatisfied with a merely passive defence of the Canal and as time passed and it began to seem less and less likely that there might be a serious attack upon Egypt he made more drastic alterations to the scheme of defence. This time he outlined a defensive system based upon mobility; the first line was only to be held in outposts while a newly-constituted Mobile Force would now form the basis of the defence. ⁹⁵

These efforts to modify the defensive scheme he inherited from Maxwell reflect a basic antipathy on Murray's part for the whole concept of the Suez Canal Defences. He described them as 'wasteful' to Robertson in the middle of February and it is hard to disagree with this assessment when one discovers that in 1917 groups of labourers were employed for many months in dismantling the works themselves and salvaging the machinery and water piping. ⁹⁶ While it probably is true that the construction of the defensive preparations along the Canal are 'of value as a military and administrative study' and have perhaps been unfairly overshadowed by the more dramatic crossing of the Sinai, neither of these points of view can have been of much comfort to Sir Archibald either at the time or afterwards. ⁹⁷ In fact, perhaps the greatest value of the work done upon the defences lay in the experience that Murray's men gained of life in the Sinai desert - experience that would prove invaluable in the months ahead. Somewhat less obviously it also seems that the construction of defences on Egypt's eastern border helped to unite the country to a certain extent, for the Sultan actually offered to help pay for the work! ⁹⁸

⁹⁴ Lynden-Bell to GOC ANZAC Army Corps 10 Feb. 1916, W.O. 95/4361.

⁹⁵ Memorandum from GHQ MEF to Corps. Principles with regard to defence by Lynden-Bell 6 Mar. 1916, W.O. 158/892.

⁹⁶ Murray to CIGS 15 Feb. 1916, W.O. 95/4361. Report on Water Supply, Murray papers 79/48/2.

⁹⁷ MacMunn, pp.200-201. MacMunn was an expert in logistics and obviously found the subject of great interest, which explains why he covers it in such great detail in the Official History, pp.89-94.

⁹⁸ McMahon to F.O. 30 Jan. 1916, FO 371/2671/18728. The Sultan offered £500,000 but, in fact, the Egyptian finances could not cope with such a sum according to McMahon; so much for Egyptian generosity!

The decision to strengthen the Canal Defences was based upon an assessment of Turkish intentions and capabilities that Murray inherited on his arrival in Egypt. The basic expectation was of an attack upon the country by as many as 250,000 of the enemy; but, as Murray later admitted, this estimate was 'by no means certain'. ⁹⁹ Moreover, he now began to receive reports that called it seriously into question. For example, the railway that the Turks had begun to construct up to and beyond Beersheba in 1915 and had caused such consternation in London no longer appeared as such a threat under closer examination; it had only been built, it seemed, to meet local needs in the area and not to threaten Egypt. ¹⁰⁰ In fact, opinions were starting to be aired that the so-called Turkish preparations for an attack were 'only a blind'. ¹⁰¹ Nor were affairs in Syria favourable for the massing of such an attack - reports of serious food shortages and disturbances reached the British and made it seem unlikely that the Turks could support an army of anywhere near 250,000 in the country. ¹⁰²

And yet, not everyone was convinced. General Birdwood felt sure that such apparent preparations would not be made without some intention to attack - especially since this was not the Teutonic way of doing things: 'I do not think the Germans would make the elaborate arrangements they have done for months past now without meaning business.' ¹⁰³ Fear of the German influence upon the Turks was great; this was caused partly by reports of big guns being sent by Berlin towards Egypt, and also by concern over the completion of the Amman^ys tunnel which was due to be opened in March, thus making the direct route from Germany to Syria via the Baghdad railway far easier when the tunnels through the Taurus were finished - and there

⁹⁹ Murray Despatches. First Despatch 1 June 1916, p. 10.

¹⁰⁰ Intelligence Memorandum. The Turkish railway to the Egyptian Frontier. 12 Jan. 1916, W.O. 157/700.

¹⁰¹ Rodd to Grey 15 Jan. 1916. FO 371/2767/1477.

¹⁰² Statement of Shakir ibn Raji Mahmud Niamah. 19 Sept. 1916, L/P+S/11/112/4459. Intelligence Summary 5, 11 Jan. 1916.

¹⁰³ Birdwood to Hankey 13 Feb. 1916, Hankey papers HNKY 4/8.

was information that work on these had been renewed. ¹⁰⁴ But Egypt need not have worried about the Baghdad railway, for its capacity was soon absorbed in moving troops towards the Caucasus and not Egypt. The Grand Duke Nicholas had been conducting a successful campaign and on 15 February he captured the fortress of Erzerum, and then in April he took Trebizond, a harbour on the Black Sea coast. These events naturally caused the Turks to turn their attention away from Egypt. ¹⁰⁵ Moreover, there were also fresh indications that the enemy was actually massing men for a fresh advance in Mesopotamia. ¹⁰⁶

Somewhat ironically the British need not have worried unduly about German influence upon the Turks. In reality the Germans were 'woefully short of factual information' about the situation in Egypt and were not even aware of the new Canal Defences. ¹⁰⁷ Nor could Berlin bend Constantinople to its way of thinking as easily as the British often assumed; on the contrary, there was considerable friction between the Germans and Turks at this time caused by serious disagreements as to strategy. Berlin seemed none too enthusiastic about a further attempt upon Egypt, at least at the present, and would not release the necessary troops the Turks demanded for such an operation. ¹⁰⁸ Nevertheless, such a project was still 'slumbering' in the minds of the strategists in Berlin and the British picked up some evidence that an attack might be made in the summer - a piece of information that would prove totally accurate. ¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁴ R.V. Stewart to Fitzgerald 3 Jan. 1916, PRO 30/57/48. 'Note on the Railway from Adana to Beersheba with a view to possible demolition' by Clayton 16 Jan. 1916, W.O. 158/923. Intelligence Summary 9 Jan. 1916, W.O. 157/700.

¹⁰⁵ Murray Despatches, First Despatch 1 June 1916, p.13. Official History, p.159.

¹⁰⁶ 'Criticism of the Turkish attack on Egypt' 8 Jan. 1916, W.O. 106/714. Notes by Col. Bird 10 Jan. 1916, W.O. 106/885: 'Evidence is accumulating that the Turco-Germans mean to make a greater effort in Mesopotamia than against Egypt.'

¹⁰⁷ Weber, pp.180-181.

¹⁰⁸ W.D. Intelligence Section 9 Feb. 1916, W.O. 157/701.

¹⁰⁹ Weber, p.179. Mr. Findlay to Grey 8 Feb. 1916, CAB 37/143/22.

THE FIRST MOVES INTO THE SINAI

Even though much of Murray's time was taken up in reorganising troops, despatching them to France and completing the Canal Defences he had his eyes fixed on a more ambitious scheme: 'From the day I landed in Egypt I always had in view the reoccupation of the whole of the Sinai Peninsula.' ¹¹⁰ This was a 'stupendous conception' and beyond the bounds of duty, for his orders were merely to make Egypt secure - nothing had been said about an advance of this kind. ¹¹¹ As early as 25 January 1916 he informed Robertson that 'the occupation of El Arish itself seems to me one of the principal essentials in connection with the defence of Egypt from the East.' ¹¹² In fact, he and his staff now began to consider the possibility of an early movement towards El Arish; it was thought that a move might be made to the Qatia region by a force of one division and two mounted brigades after which a further advance could be attempted upon El Arish with the additional aid of supply by sea along the Sinai coast. ¹¹³ However, the Royal Navy did not waste much time in squashing such a plan since, in their considered opinion, the coast was not suitable for the loading of supplies and any advance towards El Arish would, therefore, have to rely upon a railway being constructed across the Sinai. ¹¹⁴

With these fresh developments in mind Murray wrote to Robertson early in February and explained that he hoped to make the occupation of Qatia possible by running a railway to it from Qantara; and then his objective would be El Arish if the line could be still

¹¹⁰ Aldershot lecture by Murray, op.cit.

¹¹¹ Elgood, p. 229.

¹¹² Murray to CIGS 25 Jan. 1916, W.O. 95/4360.

¹¹³ Dawnay to CGS 30 Jan. 1916, Murray papers 79/48/3. Proceedings of Joint Naval and Military Conference, 31 Jan. 1916, W.O. 95/4361.

¹¹⁴ Proceedings of Joint Naval and Military Conference, 4 Feb. 1916, W.O. 95/4361.

further extended. ¹¹⁵ He followed this private letter with a long official memorandum to the CIGS dated 15 February in which he outlined his intentions for the future and explained his requirements; in this appreciation Murray repeated his aims as expressed in his private letter earlier in the month to push on for Qatia, with El Arish as his ultimate objective. However, he now described in more detail exactly what he intended at El Arish - a permanent base to halt any advances towards Egypt and from which 'rapid offensive operations' could be launched against enemy concentrations in southern Palestine. This appreciation remained the corner-stone of all Murray's thinking upon the defence of Egypt and he referred to it again and again throughout his time as C in C of the EEF. Crucially, he estimated the number of divisions he would need to make the country secure on the eastern front - four divisions and three mounted brigades all at full strength was the requirement, he believed. ¹¹⁶ Sir Archibald's keen desire to get on the offensive in the Sinai can be judged by a subsequent request he made of the CIGS; although he remained loyal to the demands of London whenever divisions were taken from him, he nevertheless asked if he might keep one good division for the push on Qatia. ¹¹⁷ London's response to Egypt's plans was encouraging as far as the occupation of Qatia was concerned, but the occupation of El Arish was considered 'a doubtful matter' by the CIGS and he would look at it again later. ¹¹⁸ The occupation of Qatia appealed to London because they picked up Murray's argument that its capture would reduce the threat to Egypt and so enable the War Office to transfer troops rapidly from Murray's command to France; and, of course, it

¹¹⁵ Murray to Robertson 7 Feb. 1916, BM Add. MS 52462.

¹¹⁶ Murray to Robertson 15 Feb. 1916, W.O. 95/4361. The Official History (pp.170-174) repeats the full text of this appreciation but fails to mention the planning for an advance to El Arish prior to this.

¹¹⁷ Murray to Robertson 21 Feb. 1916, Robertson papers I/32/5. This request was denied by the CIGS.

¹¹⁸ Chief London to Chief Medforce 27 Feb. 1916.

was the policy that had been recommended to Maxwell by the War Office at the end of 1915. ¹¹⁹

Meanwhile, the troops in Egypt were steeling themselves for an advance into the Sinai and even Maxwell - about to leave the country - caught something of the general enthusiasm instilled by the new Chief's determination to act offensively, because he wrote to a friend: 'Murray can now exercise his undoubted abilities on visionary possibilities.' ¹²⁰ The railway line from Quantara was soon begun and in four weeks sixteen miles had been laid. Once it started to proceed beyond the outer rim of the new defences at the Canal it became necessary to establish permanent positions to protect the line from enemy attack. The troops of the 5th Mounted Brigade under Brigadier-General Wiggins were assigned this task. GHQ saw this as an excellent opportunity to get the Yeomanry 'acquainted with the country' and their horses accustomed to the conditions; in fact, nobody was quite sure how far the mounted troops could even operate in such conditions, so the staff at Ismailia were anxious to learn the truth. ¹²¹ Indeed, one needs to remember that during these early days in the Sinai GHQ was forced into an experimental period as it tried to ascertain just what the men could do under desert conditions, a fact that is given still more significance by a comment of Murray's that he had been told operations in the Sinai after 1 April were impossible. ¹²²

¹¹⁹ Numbers necessary for the defence of Egypt, Feb. 1916, W.O. 106/713. This paper contains a handwritten note outlining the timetable for the withdrawal of divisions from Egypt until 1 June 1916 which more or less became the policy followed.

¹²⁰ Maxwell to Wilson 16 Mar. 1916, Henry Wilson papers 73/1/20.

¹²¹ Reconnaissance of Qatia by Dawnay 15 Mar. 1916, W.O. 95/4361. Reconnaissance of Um Mukjheit 16 Mar. 1916, W.O. 95/4520.

¹²² Murray to Robertson 25 Apr. 1916, Robertson papers I/32/22.

In the early days of April confidence was high at GHQ. The C in C declared himself 'pleased' with the reconnaissance work done and expressed his pleasure in still more glowing terms to Robertson: 'We have been very active the last week or so... The Qatia District is completely under our control and to the south we have pushed forward reconnaissances... They are excellent training for the raw Yeomanry,'

¹²³ In fact, the Yeomanry had gone beyond Qatia to Bir el Abd, a position twenty miles further east and 'a very long way further than anyone else has been', as one of their own number proudly confessed.

¹²⁴ Meanwhile, the Australian Light Horse conducted a very successful raid to Jifjafa where they captured an enemy well-boring plant. ¹²⁵

However, Murray soon discovered that he would not be allowed to give all his attention to events in the Sinai, for happenings hundreds of miles away were about to make some strange demands upon his command.

At the War Committee on 13 April Asquith told his colleagues that Mark Sykes had confided to him that the Grand Duke was nervous about the Turkish reinforcements descending upon his army. The question therefore arose as to whether the British might be able to arrange a diversion to assist their Russian allies, and Robertson mentioned the possibility of 'some form of menace, possibly on the Syrian Coast.' ¹²⁶

The Russians were certainly hoping that London might consider a landing at Alexandretta by troops stationed in Egypt, for their Foreign Minister mentioned it 'more than once' to the British ambassador early in April. ¹²⁷ The Alexandretta option was one that never seemed to die completely throughout 1916; Lloyd George suggested it in January to aid the Russians while Pétain

¹²³ GHQ to 15th Corps. 4 Apr. 1916, W.O. 95/4362. Murray to Robertson 4 Apr. 1916, BM Add. MS 52461.

¹²⁴ McGrigor Diary 2 Apr. 1916.

¹²⁵ Official History, p. 160.

¹²⁶ War Committee meeting 13 Apr. 1916, CAB 42/12/8.

¹²⁷ Sir G. Buchanan to F.O. 4 Apr. 1916, FO 371/2777/114891.

mentioned it in a private conversation at the end of March. ¹²⁸ The Russians continued to press for British action at Alexandretta all through the month of April so that early in May the EEF found itself having to consider such an operation seriously. In a long paper on the subject Dawnay rejected the scheme principally because it could not guarantee success in drawing sufficient forces away from the Russian front and would require eight divisions which could only be obtained by diverting troops earmarked in Egypt for France and utilising most of the British forces in Macedonia. ¹²⁹ Robertson was never going to countenance such a severe drain upon his resources, especially since it might keep precious divisions from the Western Front - an opinion shared by Joffre for the French. ¹³⁰

Although London and Egypt rejected a major amphibious landing at Alexandretta this was not the end of the affair for Murray. The Russians needed a diversion and Sykes - ever inventive - suggested a classic bluff; a base would be built at Cyprus in order to give the Turks every impression that the intention was to land troops in the Alexandretta region and so divert 30,000 additional enemy men to Syria and away from the Grand Duke. ¹³¹ Robertson liked the idea and asked Sir Archibald to give an 'air of reality' to the preparations on Cyprus on 14 April. ¹³² Murray was not over-enthusiastic about this scheme but he nonetheless made sure all was well organised; in fact, the ruse was entered into in great detail with stores and cases being marked 'Alexandretta' and false information deliberately being

¹²⁸ T. Wilson (ed.), The political diaries of C.P. Scott, 1911-1928 (London, 1970), p.177, 28 Jan. 1916. Repington, p.160, 31 Mar. 1916.

¹²⁹ Memorandum regarding operations in the Gulf of Iskanderun by Dawnay, 3 May 1916, W.O. 95/4362.

¹³⁰ Military assistance for Russia by Robertson, no date, and Joffre to CIGS 25 Apr. 1916, CAB 42/13/2.

¹³¹ The potential offensive against the Ottoman Empire by Sykes 13 Apr. 1916, W.O. 106/731.

¹³² Chief London to Chief Egyptforce 14 Apr. 1916, W.O. 95/4362.

spread by Egyptian Intelligence. ¹²³ Somewhat ironically, even though the intention was to distract the Turks, the real effect of the plan may have been to divert the attention of the EEF's GHQ at a crucial time, for the battalion of troops assigned to Cyprus left Egypt on 22 April 1916 with staff officers ordered to give the impression the force was in fact far larger; but this was the day before the defeat at Qatia and must have diverted some of GHQ's attention.

The bluff at Cyprus was not the only way in which the Grand Duke's demands for help affected Murray's operations. Robertson felt constrained by Russia's pressure to stimulate the EEF to further action in the Sinai since this was the only practical way in which London could offer indirect military support to its ally. He consequently started to take a keen interest in Murray's operations around the Qatia region 'as the Russians are pressing us to do everything in our power to retain the Turks in Asia Minor'. ¹²⁴ But other pressures were at work upon the CIGS; matters were coming to a head at Kut and there now seemed no chance of saving the beleaguered British garrison. As a consequence of this impending disaster Robertson desperately sought help from his colleague in Egypt: 'any success you can achieve during the next few days will be most valuable.' ¹²⁵ Again the timing was all wrong; this request reached Sir Archibald only two days after his cavalry had suffered a serious reverse at Qatia, so there was no way in which he could fulfil the CIGS's wishes for the moment. It is ironic that Murray's determination to start an advance into Sinai as soon as possible actually placed him under greater scrutiny from London and meant that more was expected of him than he could ever offer.

¹²³ Note by Maj. Nugent 23 Apr. 1916. and Note 27 Apr. 1916, W.O. 157/703.

¹²⁴ CIGS to GOC in C Egypt 13 Apr. 1916, W.O. 106/715.

¹²⁵ Chief London to Chief Egyptforce 25 Apr. 1916, W.O. 95/4362.

In spite of these mounting pressures upon the EEF Murray continued with his intention of occupying Qatia. As early as the end of March he made it plain to his subordinates that the capture of this position was to be permanent and part of the extended defence of Egypt. ¹³⁶ By the middle of April, moreover, we find him informing Robertson that he hoped to secure the Qatia area by the end of the same month. ¹³⁷ But Qatia was not intended solely as a defensive base; the EEF had become increasingly concerned about the appearance of new German aircraft which outclassed their own and, therefore, it hoped to create an advanced landing ground at Qatia so that these machines could be knocked out by a surprise RFC raid upon Beersheba where they were based. ¹³⁸ Enemy aerial activity had become increasingly intense and regular raids upon shipping in the Suez Canal had caused some consternation at GHQ; so much so, in fact, that the issue was mentioned in a memorandum drawn up for the War Committee meeting of 4 May. ¹³⁹ But this was a problem that continued to dog the EEF - and it was a serious one, for operations in the Sinai could be greatly hampered by enemy aerial activity - until General Allenby succeeded to its command and received from the War Office modern machines that gave him the air supremacy Murray had always lacked.

¹³⁶ GOC to 15th Army Corps 28 Mar. 1916, W.O. 95/4361.

¹³⁷ GOC in C Egypt to CIGS 14 Apr. 1916, W.O. 106/715.

¹³⁸ Conference at GHQ with RFC and Intelligence 19 Apr. 1916, W.O. 157/703.

¹³⁹ Memorandum on anti-aircraft guns, no date, CAB 42/13/4.

THE SHOCK AT QATIA: 23 APRIL 1916

The first suggestion GHQ received that its troops beyond the railhead might be in trouble was a wire from 52nd Division to the effect that the infantry post at Dueidar was under attack. ¹⁴⁰ This post was actually the least extended of the outposts covering the railhead and news that it was being attacked did not bode well for the mounted troops encamped to the east, a fact which was confirmed by a message from General Lawrence, then in command of the No.3 Section Canal Defence (under whose command the British troops being engaged fell), who admitted that his men at Oghratina and Qatia were 'in difficulties' according to reports from Romani. ¹⁴¹ Oghratina, a small oasis to the east of Qatia, marked the furthest eastward extension of the EEF's men, and was held by two squadrons of the Worcester Yeomanry, while ^{at} Qatia (a far larger oasis) one squadron of the Gloucester Hussars was in place. Perhaps crucially for the fate of both outposts the Yeomanry each had dismounted detachments with them. Meanwhile at Romani to the north of Qatia a force of Gloucester Hussars was entrenched, but played no part in the engagement.

In spite of the obviously developing battle around Qatia the accounts which reached GHQ still remained 'not clear' throughout 23 April. ¹⁴² This was reflected by a telegram that was despatched to London that very day; in it mention was made of the attack upon Dueidar and Qatia, but the impression given was that the Yeomanry had managed to withdraw - an announcement that would soon be proved quite wrong. ¹⁴³ Although GHQ had only a sketchy idea of what was going on in the Sinai it nevertheless sought to take some kind of action immediately by ordering the RFC to bomb Qatia at dawn the following

¹⁴⁰ 23 Apr. 1916, W.O. 95/4362.

¹⁴¹ H.A. Lawrence to GHQ 23 Apr. 1916, W.O. 95/4362.

¹⁴² 23 Apr. 1916, W.O. 157/703.

¹⁴³ 23 Apr. 1916, W.O. 95/4362.

day. ¹⁴⁴ In fact, although much was later made of this aerial attack as a way in which the EEF could retaliate at the enemy, the whole affair was a fiasco; by the time the raid was made the Turks had left the area and the planes actually bombed the Yeomanry's empty front lines! ¹⁴⁵

It was only during 24 April that GHQ began to realise what had happened in the Sinai and in a second wire to London about the engagement explained that the fighting seemed to have been 'of a more severe nature than the first reports showed' in which the Yeomanry had 'suffered heavily' ¹⁴⁶ GHQ had been hampered during this crisis by the absence of its Chief. On 23 April Murray had attended Holy Communion at 7.30 a.m., for it was Easter Sunday (which lends strength to the argument that this was a well-orchestrated Turkish operation owing much to Teutonic thoroughness and not unlike the Arab attempt to catch the Israelis off-guard on the Day of Atonement in 1973). He left Ismailia by special train and travelled with a number of his staff to a little-known station on Egypt's western frontier called El Alamein to see off a column for action against the Senussi. According to his diary he did not receive news of the fighting until 24 April after which he immediately returned to Ismailia; and on 25 April he had a very early interview with General Lawrence to gain the fullest details of exactly what had transpired. ¹⁴⁷

This, then, was GHQ's perspective upon the action at Qatia; but what actually happened in the Sinai, and why? One word is enough to describe these events as far as the EEF is concerned:

¹⁴⁴ GHQ to GOC No.3 Section 23 Apr. 1916, W.O. 95/4362.

¹⁴⁵ Murray Despatches, 1st Despatch 1 June 1916, p.27. Murray described the raid as 'extremely successful' so that 'the enemy was made to pay a heavy price' for the battle at Qatia. For the real effects of this raid see Qatia Patrol Report, 25 Apr. 1916, W.O. 95/4520.

¹⁴⁶ Chief Egyptforce to Chief London 24 April 1916, W.O. 95/4362.

¹⁴⁷ Murray Dairy 23, 24 and 25 Apr. 1916.

surprise. Although the official account goes out of its way to defend the Yeomanry against any charges of laxity in defence it is not wholly convincing. ¹⁴⁶ In reality, the truth was deliberately obscured by the official historians who had been correctly informed about the true course of the battle, thus leaving themselves open to the charge of having produced an 'apologia' for the entire affair. ¹⁵⁰

According to Kress von Kressenstein, he learnt of the progress of the railway from Qantara in March, and led a 'reconnaissance in force' against Dueidar and Qatia with about 3,500 men. ¹⁵¹ Kress went to great trouble to ensure that his men escaped detection by the RFC by hiding them amongst palm trees, not pitching tents and moving by night. ¹⁵² Measures such as these enabled Kress to strike a blow which 'for combined speed, skill, daring and success is hardly to be matched... in the campaign'. ¹⁵³ Nonetheless, the RFC has picked up evidence of increased Turkish activity in the Sinai over the past three weeks and on the evening of 22 April a report was made suggesting that 'an advance on Qatia itself was impending'. ¹⁵⁴ Since the enemy attack was made early on 23 April this warning may not have been of much help to the Yeomanry even if they had received it - which they do not seem to have done - although General Chauvel seems to have got wind of this information. ¹⁵⁵

Good though the preparations and execution of the enemy attack

¹⁴⁶ Official History, p.169: 'This information... tends to relieve the Yeomanry of the charge of having been completely surprised.'

¹⁵⁰ Chaytor to Director, Historical Section Military Branch, 22 Oct. 1925, CAB 45/78.

¹⁵¹ Kress von Kressenstein, art.cit., p.505. Official History, p.170.

¹⁵² GHQ to GOC No.3 Section, 6 May 1916, W.O. 95/4362.

¹⁵³ Official History, p.162.

¹⁵⁴ RFC Weekly Summary 29 Apr. 1916, W.O. 157/703.

¹⁵⁵ Hill, p.70. There seems to have been a break-down in communications between GHQ and its forward units not unlike a similar failure which took place at the First Battle of Gaza.

certainly were it was assisted by a series of miscalculations on the part of the British. The Yeomanry probably did not give enough attention to their own security; they did not manage to keep the enemy under observation and little had been done to prepare a defensive position at Qatia when the battle finally commenced.¹⁵⁶ This failure was itself accentuated by a thick mist which helped to conceal Kress's precise movements and prevented any RFC reconnaissance flights.

The dispositions of the Yeomanry could also be criticised, as one contemporary commented: 'Someone should surely get into trouble for allowing a small force to be right out into the blue and not being aware of the massing of the enemy.'¹⁵⁷ There was little, if no, communications between the isolated outposts at Qatia, Oghratina and Romani so that Kress was able to attack each one at his leisure.¹⁵⁸ These advanced posts were also too far forward, which made their rapid reinforcement very difficult when they came under attack. Murray himself had expressed the opinion in March that mounted troops could be placed too far forward.¹⁵⁹

Both at Qatia and Oghratina the Yeomanry were overwhelmed by superior numbers and heavier firepower - being forced to surrender only after a stiff fight at both positions. And yet even then the mounted troops were not doomed; they did have the opportunity of escape because of their greater speed, but they did not take advantage of this. After the battle Murray criticised his troops for holding their position for too long and so allowing the bulk of their horses to be shelled, thus making retreat impossible.¹⁶⁰ It may have been that the commanders at Qatia and Oghratina were concerned for the detachments of engineers and dismounted details assigned to their

¹⁵⁶ Chaytor to Director, Historical Section 22 Oct. 1925, *op cit* Loder to Father, 1 May, 1916, Loder papers.

¹⁵⁷ McGrigor Diary 26 Apr. 1916.

¹⁵⁸ Kearsey, p. 56.

¹⁵⁹ Lynden-Bell to GOC 9th Army Corps 6 Mar. 1916, W.O. 95/4361.

¹⁶⁰ Chief Egyptforce to Chief London 25 Apr. 1916, W.O. 95/4362. Murray to Robertson 14 May 1916, Robertson papers I/32/26.

forces because to have evacuated their posts speedily would have meant abandoning these men; however, when the equivalent units at Romani and Dueidar retired from their posts they left behind the railway construction party they were supposed to be protecting and when it turned up at the railhead it was initially mistaken for a Turkish unit! ¹⁶¹ Moreover, GHQ itself, although most critical of the Yeomanry's behaviour, may have been to a certain extent responsible for it. While General Lawrence did not intend his cavalry to hold their ground if heavily pressed at Qatia this was, nonetheless, the ultimate objective of GHQ, as had been explained by Lynden-Bell at the end of March: 'It is not intended to fight a mere delaying action in that district [i.e. Qatia] as a preliminary to a main action along the line of the Canal Defence.' ¹⁶² The aim was, as always, the permanent occupation of Qatia and it is possible that the Worcester and Gloucester Yeomanry may have been subconsciously influenced by such orders even in April.

In sheer military terms the actions at Qatia, Oghratina and Dueidar were small affairs, while the losses incurred by the EEF - three and a half squadrons of Yeomanry - were hardly likely to diminish the effectiveness of Murray's army. However, the Official History is quite wrong to suggest that all of this had no effect, except to delay the railways for a few days. ¹⁶³ On the contrary, what took place on 23 April sent shock-waves through the EEF so that some officers at GHQ found themselves performing a strange role a few days later: 'The day was chiefly spent in endeavouring to counteract the pernicious effect of several "panic" wires sent by officers... as regards the Qatia fighting, to ladies and friends in Cairo.' ¹⁶⁴ Because of these irresponsible actions the population of Egypt refused to believe the official communiqués circulated by the EEF and the popular belief remained that the British had been heavily

¹⁶¹ Chaytor to Director, Historical Section, Military Branch, 22 Oct. 1925, *op cit.*

¹⁶² Lynden-Bell to GOC 15th Army Corps. 28 Mar. 1916, W.O. 95/4361.

¹⁶³ Official History, p. 169.

¹⁶⁴ 26 Apr. 1916, W.O. 157/703.

defeated. Although Lynden-Bell tried to put a brave face on things and even suggested that the raids had 'bucked up' the British troops who had begun to believe that the existence of the enemy was a 'myth' his Chief's confidence had taken a serious knock. ¹⁶⁵ On the other hand, the entire incident 'raised the confidence' of the Turkish troops to 'a remarkable degree'. ¹⁶⁶ Quite remarkably the affair gained an influence far beyond its importance in a country as volatile as Egypt and the High Commissioner, then negotiating with the Sherif of Mecca in an attempt to hasten his entry into the war on the Allied side, could not detach himself from his surroundings. He therefore telegraphed the Foreign Office and recommended an alteration in the text of the next letter to be sent to Sherif Hussein in order that no suggestion be given that the Turks had actually given up their offensive intentions against Egypt, a line of argument fully supported in London 'after the recent attack on us, and capture of our troops within a few miles of the Canal.' ¹⁶⁷

Events at Qatia certainly made the EEF rethink its tactics in the Sinai and GHQ instructed its forces to construct strong and 'self-contained' outposts manned by infantry; the mounted troops were to engage in constant reconnaissance and only rest in their positions - on no account were they to occupy trenches and so lose their mobility. ¹⁶⁸ Meanwhile, Murray instituted an inquiry into the affair and demanded detailed answers to nine precise questions about the events of 23 April from General Lawrence's staff. ¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁵ Clayton to Wingate 29 May 1916, Wingate papers 136/6/154. Australian Official History, p.93.

¹⁶⁶ Djemal Pasha, p.170.

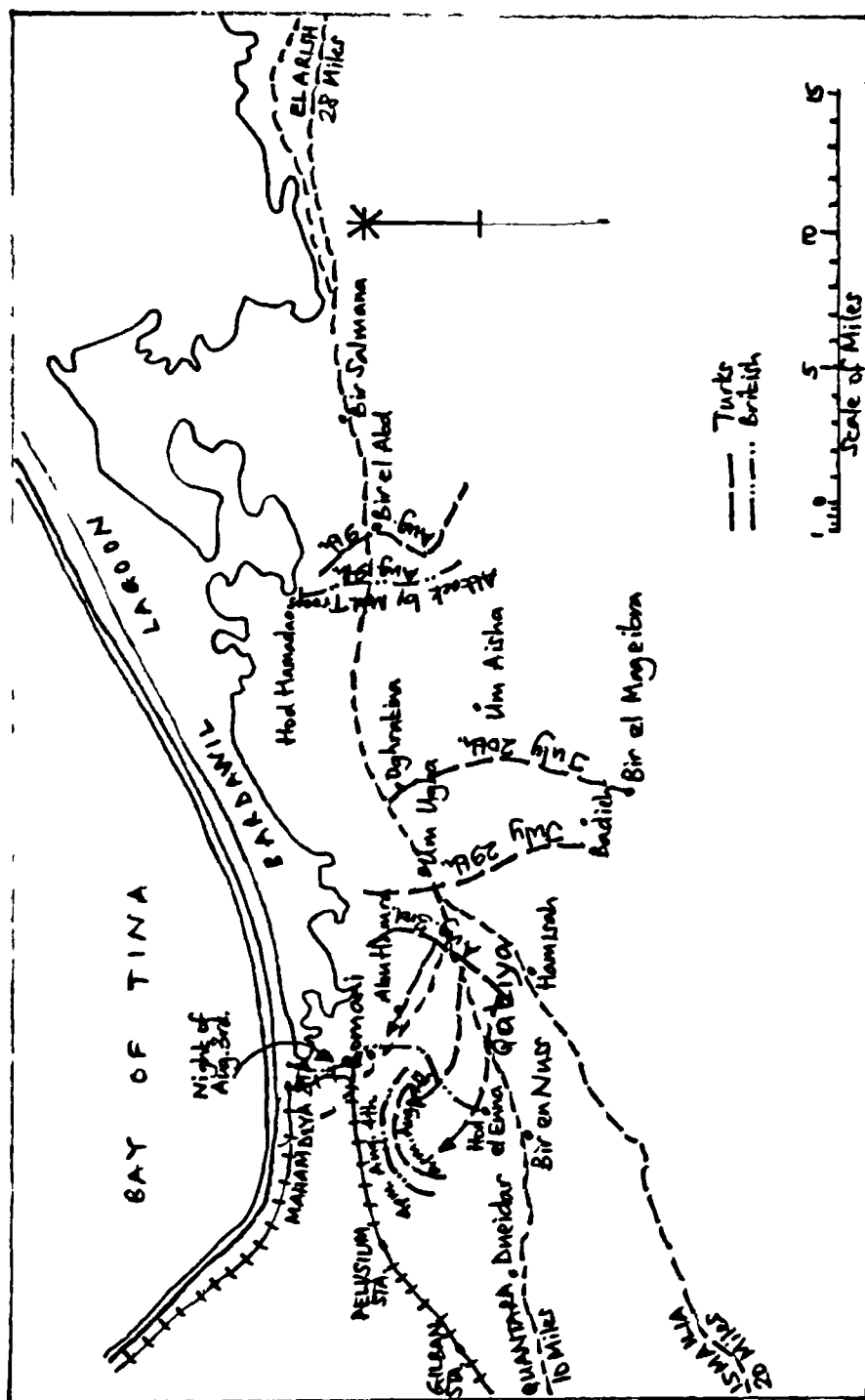
¹⁶⁷ McMahon to F.O. 3 May 1916. Minute by GRC 4 May 1916, FO 371/2768/84129.

¹⁶⁸ GHQ to GOC 9th Army Corps, 2nd ANZAC, No.3 Section 26 Apr. 1916, W.O. 95/4362.

¹⁶⁹ GHQ to GOC No.3 Section 30 Apr. 1916, W.O. 95/4362.

The lessons of this 'lamentable occurrence' were not lost on GHQ, therefore, and this was reflected in the decisions taken after the skirmish. Major-General Chauvel, commanding the ANZAC Mounted Division, was made responsible for the advanced positions and although Romani was reoccupied on 24 April he did not follow the tactics of his predecessor by maintaining isolated units at a number of oases; rather, he created a substantial fortified camp at Romani and maintained vigorous patrolling. The railway was continued behind this covering screen and by 19 May it was open for traffic right up to Romani itself, so that the position could be garrisoned by infantry on a serious scale. This was in line with orders that Lawrence had previously received from GHQ to strongly fortify Romani once the railhead reached that position. ¹⁷⁰ The EEF would soon be permanently ensconced in the heart of the Sinai desert, therefore, and only a major attack by the enemy would now be able to dislodge it.

¹⁷⁰ GHQ to GOC No. 3 Section 5 May 1916, W. O. 95/4362.



MAP No. 4: THE BATTLE OF ROMANI

CHAPTER 9

PLANNING, PREPARING AND FIGHTING THE
BATTLE OF ROMANI: MURRAY IN THE SINAI
MAY - AUGUST 1916

'In very truth the gods bestow not on the same men all their gifts;
you know how to gain a victory:
you know not how to use one.'

Maharbal to Hannibal

SECURING THE ROMANI POSITION AND DISCUSSIONS AS TO FURTHER ADVANCES IN
THE SINAI

From the middle of May onwards the 52nd Division was moved to Romani so that by 4 June 1916 it was in position. Work was now started upon defensive positions at Romani and Mahamdiyah (on the coast to the north) to cover the railhead. The entire position was, in fact, supplied by two railways, the main line from Qantara that came directly to Romani and a narrow-gauge line from Port Said which ran along the coast to Mahamdiyah. A water pipe-line was also under construction from Qantara, but by 4 June it had only progressed 17 miles beyond its starting-place so that the troops at Romani were supplied with water by trucks and convoys of camels only. ¹

All of this had been carefully orchestrated by Murray at GHQ and was according to arrangements agreed upon at a conference on 17 May. ² The Chief took a very close interest in the precise arrangements for the fortified camps at the Romani position and requested General Lawrence's presence in person at GHQ to explain his proposals with the aid of a map and an accompanying staff officer. ³ Murray was determined to make

¹ There was water at Romani but it proved too salty for the British troops to drink.

² Report of Conference held at GHQ 17 May 1916, W.O. 95/4362.

³ GHQ to GOC No.3 Section 22 May 1916 and CGS to General Lawrence 23 May 1916, W.O. 95/4362.

sure that there were no further lapses like those at Qatia; but his constant scrutiny and examination of the smallest details of his subordinate's plans was to lead to friction within the EEF, and to a serious personality clash.

A further conference was held at GHQ on 7 June which Sir Archibald described in the following terms: 'Most unsatisfactory. Nothing but opposition on the part of General Lawrence to my plans and arrangements.' ⁴ What had happened to cause this rift between the C in C and his subordinate who was to conduct operations in the Sinai? We know that this meeting went on for some considerable time and that Murray then consulted Lynden-Bell in the early evening. Moreover, June was an extremely hot month and Sir Archibald consistently complained about this in his diary. Neither of these factors were likely to keep the C in C in the best of tempers, therefore, even if there had been no disagreements with General Lawrence. ⁵ But there had been - and there would be more in the future. Murray favoured the construction of an entrenched position at Um Ugba - some miles to the east of Romani and much closer to Turkish forces - since he believed such a location could most successfully prevent the enemy assembling forces in the Qatia district. Lawrence, however, 'strongly expressed' the opinion that so advanced a position would be 'unsafe' because of his shortage of troops, and he preferred to construct defences around Romani. Remarkably, Murray bowed to the obstinacy of his subordinate - though not without making sure that his disagreement was placed on the record. ⁶ That Murray did not pull rank

⁴ Murray Diary 7 June 1916. This entry is all the more remarkable since Murray's diary is usually totally devoid of comment, so that we must conclude he was more than a little angry!

⁵ McGrigor Diary 7 June 1916. Murray Diary 5 & 20 June 1916. McGrigor was made a temporary ADC to Lynden-Bell for a few weeks in June so his diary gives us a useful insight into the workings of GHQ in this period.

⁶ GHQ to GOC No.3 Section 9 June 1916, W.O. 95/4363.

on Lawrence and demand his submission reflects not so much that he actually agreed with the other's plans and would not admit it, but rather demonstrates his style of command: Murray saw his role as dispensing the general policy required from GHQ while Lawrence executed this in detail according to his greater knowledge of the situation because he was the man on the spot. Such a division of command might work if there was a good understanding between the two senior officers concerned - which there was not - and if the EEF did not become seriously engaged with the enemy - which it did.

But if Lawrence objected to having his Chief looking over his shoulder and interfering with his every plan then he could take some comfort from the fact that Murray, like himself, had similar difficulties with his superior - the CIGS. We have already seen how events conspired to place pressure upon the Commander of the EEF in April to produce success for London to counter-balance the disaster at Kut and to draw Turkish troops away from the Grand Duke. But this sort of prompting did not cease as the year progressed; for example, early in May Robertson noticed that according to the War Office there was a concentration of Turks to the east of the Canal and he wondered if this did not offer an opportunity for the EEF to strike ^{at} the enemy. ⁷ However, matters became still worse on 5 June with the outbreak of the Arab Revolt in the Hejaz. Although we will consider the precise effect of this new factor upon Murray's operations in more detail elsewhere it requires a brief mention here because it had an immediate impact upon events in the Sinai even as early as this.

Robertson had, unofficially at least, been optimistic about what Murray might be able to do in the winter even before June, as he explained in a private letter in mid-May: 'It is not unlikely that you may have plenty to do... next cold weather... there is no telling what the winter may bring forth.' ⁸

This letter may well have suggested to Murray that the CIGS was becoming

⁷ CIGS to GOC in C Egypt 2 May 1916, W.O. 106/715.

⁸ Robertson to Murray 18 May 1916, Robertson papers I/32/28.

more enthusiastic about a serious offensive in the Sinai towards El Arish - but there are no details mentioned and one is left feeling that Robertson is still hedging his bets and is not prepared to commit himself - at least not quite. But by 14 June his attitude had changed and he telegraphed Sir Archibald to ask him if he might not consider the feasibility of occupying El Arish as he had suggested in his memorandum of 15 February. ¹⁰ Murray's reply to this fresh burst of enthusiasm by the CIGS was consistent and predictable: he said that he still held the views he had expressed in his paper of February, and because of this he once again requested a force of two mobile divisions and two mounted brigades in addition to three divisions and two further mounted brigades along the Canal - a total which Robertson still had not agreed to even though he had offered the EEF an extra division in his most recent telegram. Sir Archibald considered such a force a 'minimum' for operations towards El Arish since he feared that he might become 'pinned down' there unless he had sufficient strength. ¹¹

Robertson's next message stated his views more clearly; arguments for 'preparing to make a forward movement' had been 'strengthened' by developments in the Sherif's rising, he explained, so that the British could take advantage of his success or offer him some assistance by such action. Although there would be no more than the single division already offered, the CIGS did explain that Murray would not be expected to advance before October; but he would be expected to make the necessary preparations in the meantime. ¹² Murray was far happier with this telegram and expressed his full agreement with the outlined policy; even so, part of his response reflected some of the pressure that such a strategy was placing upon him: 'I intend to push on the railway daily until I am too weak and exhausted to go further.' ¹³

¹⁰ CIGS to Murray 14 June 1916, W.O. 106/715. The CIGS does not mention the Arab Revolt in this telegram.

¹¹ Murray to CIGS 26 June 1916, W.O. 106/715.

¹² CIGS to Murray 28 June 1916, W.O. 106/715.

¹³ Murray to CIGS 29 June 1916, W.O. 106/715.

While London was not officially demanding an El Arish advance before October there was a good deal more behind Robertson's promptings than this, for in his private letters to Sir Archibald he continued to hint at more than only the occupation of this position, and it is hard not to believe that he is thinking of the February memorandum and its suggestion of attacks into Syria once El Arish had been occupied. In fact, he even hinted at more reinforcements for the EEF - but it was still only hints: 'Next winter you may require a good deal of help. On the other hand you may not. We shall see later on. The great thing is to push on the El Arish railway as quickly as you can.' ¹⁴

Meanwhile, Whitehall had become obsessed with the progress of this railway. At the War Committee meeting of 6 July concern was expressed that it was not advancing as fast as possible, while Robertson nudged his subordinate regularly as to its progress and its requirements. ¹⁵ The extent to which this kind of high-level pressure influenced Murray's strategy in Sinai is clearly shown in his official communications with General Lawrence. For example, on 12 July he requested a full appreciation from the harassed general as to the next stage of the advance in the light of the Government's desire for rapid progress and the capture of El Arish. ¹⁶

The EEF had not been inactive in June and an operation had been carried out by units of No.2 Section of the Canal Defences to deny the enemy supplies of water east of the Little Bitter Lake which the Turks had used in their attack upon the Canal in February 1915. Cisterns at Wadi Um Mukhsheib and Moiya Harab were pumped dry by the troops and explosives were used to destroy natural wells. These operations

¹⁴ Robertson to Murray 10 July 1916, Robertson papers I/32/38.

¹⁵ War Committee meeting 4 July 1916, CAB 42/16/1. CIGS to Murray 11 July 1916, W.O. 106/715.

¹⁶ GHQ to GOC No.3 Section 12 July 1916, W.O. 95/4364. The Official History (p.178) gives no hint of the extent to which this pressure influenced Murray at this time.

were far more significant than their small scale suggests; as Murray explained to Robertson, they now made it 'almost impossible for the enemy to act in strength against any part of my line south of Ismailia during the summer months.' ¹⁷ Consequently the EEF was now free to concentrate all of its energies upon the advance across Sinai by the coastal route towards El Arish.

But in spite of London's fondest hopes this advance was by no means a certainty. The C in C informed his Engineer in Chief early in July that he intended to proceed from Romani towards El Arish with one mounted division and two infantry divisions in October if possible: he therefore requested that the necessary stores be prepared. ¹⁸ However, all was not nearly so straight-forward as this suggested and the Engineer in Chief's subsequent arrangements for the advance were described as 'quite inadequate' because they did not take account of the EEF's water supply; in fact, not only were these plans insufficient for an advance beyond Romani, they could not even cope with a concentration at that position on the scale of three divisions. Because of these realities Murray found himself in a most frustrating position:

The forces detailed for the advance on El Arish were immediately available; the railway had reached Romani and could be extended, but nothing except the experience gained in the past six months were available for use on the new water supply system required. ¹⁹

An entirely new installation on the west bank of the Canal was required, therefore, to make possible the 96 mile advance to El Arish. Getting wind of these plans and blissfully unaware of the full extent of the

¹⁷ Murray to Robertson 17 June 1916, Robertson papers I/32/34. Official History, p. 178.

¹⁸ GHQ to Engineer in Chief 2 July 1916, W.O. 95/4364.

¹⁹ Report on water supply, Murray papers 79/48/2.

existing obstacles, the officers of the EEF were filled with enthusiasm at the thought that at last 'the big offensive seems to have begun.' ²⁰

With so much expected of him Murray was not going to allow operations to develop in the Sinai without his closest attention. Consequently he made a detailed personal inspection of the Romani and Mahamdiyah district over a three-day period and concluded his tour with an interview with General Lawrence 'to discuss... in detail the various questions in connection with the present and future policy in the northern section.' ²¹ He followed this visit with a series of notes designed to improve matters at Romani, paying special attention to the water requirements of the troops and the construction of a railway junction at Romani. ²²

Lawrence was ordered to produce an appreciation as to how he intended to conduct the next stage of his advance. His reply on 14 July was detailed, precise and prophetic. To a remarkable extent Lawrence and his staff correctly predicted the enemy's intentions who, they believed, was carefully watching the EEF's progress and 'given a reasonable chance of success... may at any time attempt to overwhelm the head of this advance' by 'a rapid blow followed by an equally rapid retirement.' ²³ In the light of these predictions Lawrence admitted that he was none too enthusiastic about a premature move beyond Romani since it might leave him with two positions to defend, both of which were insufficiently strong enough to deal with a serious Turkish attack. ²⁴ After a further conference between the two men Murray responded to this memorandum in most favourable terms - more favourably, probably, than Lawrence ever expected. He agreed that there should be no

²⁰ McGrigor Diary 3 July 1916.

²¹ C in C's tour to Romani and Mahamdiyah 5-7 July, W.O. 95/4364.

²² G.S. to D Q M G 7 July 1916 and Murray to CGS 7 July 1916, W.O. 95/4364.

²³ GOC No.3 Section to CGS GHQ 14 July 1916, W.O. 95/4364.

²⁴ Ibid.

further advance until the defensive works and the entire position had been completed at Romani; once this had been accomplished a fresh defensive position was to be constructed at El Rabah, to the east, to cover the next stage of the railway's progress deeper into the Sinai. ²⁵

Lawrence, although he did not yet realise it, had almost exactly predicted the Turks' next move and Murray - not allowing his own feelings to cloud his judgement - agreed with his subordinate to the extent of allowing his frantic advance to be delayed somewhat in spite of the pressure from London. Early in August both would be vindicated.

²⁵ Murray Diary 18 July 1916. GHQ to GOC No.3 Section 19 July 1916, W.O. 95/4364.

PREPARING FOR THE TURKISH ATTACK

On 19 July GHQ was passed information that, for the moment at least, altered all of Murray's preparations for a further advance. Lawrence had been correct. The RFC had picked up evidence of a Turkish advance in the Sinai. The news caused a sensation at GHQ; one officer commented upon the 'great excitement' of all concerned at the thought of another enemy raid upon the Canal which, this time, would 'knock up against a very powerful force.' ²⁶ Here surely, at long last, was the EEF's opportunity to avenge Qatia and to provide London with a success that it so desperately craved; it all seemed too good to be true!

The troops already available to General Lawrence for the coming engagement were the 52nd Division and the A. and N.Z. Mounted Division, less one brigade. However, Murray was not satisfied that Lawrence had sufficient men and he at once provided him with reinforcements that, he believed, would be especially beneficial to the latter's needs. Consequently, on 19 July four regiments were moved by train to Qantara at four hours notice only and on 20 July a brigade of the 53rd Division was rushed to Romani and, in order to increase the firepower available to Lawrence's troops without placing too great a strain upon his inadequate water resources, Murray sent two machine-gun companies up the line as well. ²⁷ The C in C could barely restrain his excitement in his communications with Lawrence: he asked if there was anything more he could possibly do for No.3 Section, gave a little advice and then outlined the way in which he saw the conflict developing if it was handled correctly. Even as early as this he foresaw what would determine the course of the battle: he suggested to Lawrence that the RFC be ordered to hit the Turkish camels so as to reduce their army's mobility; that the A. and N.Z. mounted infantry save their horses as

²⁶ Murray Diary 19 July 1916. McGrigor Diary 19 July 1916.

²⁷ McGrigor Diary 19 July 1916. Official History, pp.179-181.
Murray to CIGS 21 July 1916, W.O. 95/4364.

much as possible at this stage; and that the enemy should be induced to advance on to ground already prepared for defence by No.3 Section because 'it is all to our advantage to allow him to do so, and not to launch mobile striking force until he is committed against Romani defences.' ²⁸ The C in C also noticed a weakness in Lawrence's command-structure that he did not like; since the action might well depend upon rapid decisions, he explained, he thought it better for the GOC of No.3 Section either to move his command post closer to Romani or to delegate operations on the spot to a single subordinate commander so that there would not be any unnecessary delays once the battle started. ²⁹

Meanwhile, the enemy refused to do what GHQ expected of them. They did not come on in a rapid advance followed by a sudden attack as expected; rather, their movement appeared 'very slow' and their men seemed to be 'resting'. ³⁰ They had, in fact, halted about eleven miles from Romani and were entrenching, an activity which led GHQ to believe that their intention might only be to block a further advance of the Sinai railway. ³¹ The Turks were actually awaiting the arrival of their heavy artillery which had to be moved over the loose sand by means of wooden planks. ³² But Murray could not be sure this was the only reason; he had to consider the possibility that the enemy would now sit still for good and entrench, while awaiting further reinforcements and daring the British to move them.

²⁸ GHQ to GOC No.3 Section 20 July 1916, W.O. 95/4364.

²⁹ GHQ to GOC No.3 Section 22 July 1916, W.O. 95/4364.

³⁰ Murray Diary 21 July 1916.

³¹ GHQ to GOC No.3 Section 24 July 1916, W.O. 95/4364.

³² W.D. Intelligence Section GSEEF 30 July 1916, W.O. 157/706. This proves that GHQ was aware of the reason for the Turkish delay and was not totally bemused by it as the Official History (p.182) suggests.

Sir Archibald now informed the CIGS of these most recent developments and seemed to assume that he would not attempt to assault these newly-entrenched Turkish forward positions; indeed, he actually claimed that if the enemy decided to strengthen this forward post with troops from their reserves in Gallipoli and Constantinople then the EEF 'will be giving the Russians and Arabs adequate help'. ³³ Unfortunately, all of this did not cut ice with Robertson who reversed the C in C's arguments and threw them back in his face:

It is not likely that the enemy can bring any large force against you owing to the continual successes of the Russians in the Caucasus and the Arab rising, and the general situation makes it undesirable to adopt a passive attitude. ³⁴

So once again the EEF's commander was under pressure - and he agreed to fit in with the CIGS's demands and act offensively. ³⁵ Events in the Sinai had not gone unnoticed in London and the War Committee watched with interest the movement of the Turkish force; Balfour, for one, was most enthusiastic and 'asked if there was any chance of our being able to give the Turks a drubbing.' Robertson replied to Balfour's suggestion positively and in a private letter to Murray he more or less repeated the elderly statesman's statement; 'I hope the Turk will receive^a sharp lesson for being so audacious as to present himself in front of your troops.' ³⁶ But the men of Whitehall had no conception

³³ Murray to CIGS 22 July 1916, W.O. 106/715.

³⁴ CIGS to Murray 23 July 1916, W.O. 106/715.

³⁵ Murray to CIGS, WO 106/715. This exchange of telegrams is significant for it demonstrates that the CIGS was responsible for Murray considering an attack upon the Turks and not Murray himself, as the Official History claims (p.182).

³⁶ War Committee meeting 28 July 1916, CAB 42/16/11. Robertson to Murray 1 Aug. 1916, BM Add. MS 52461.

of the true nature of conditions in the Sinai or indeed what was actually about to transpire there. The CIGS, for one, was sure that the enemy 'would never be so mad as to dream of attacking you in your prepared positions' (an opinion that would soon be proved totally incorrect), and he still failed to understand how it was that Ottoman infantry could make do in the Sinai without elaborate preparations for the supply of water while their British counterparts could not. ³⁷

Given the attitude of his superiors across the water Murray had little option but to alter his strategy by planning to attack the stationary enemy force which seemed to be mocking him. He repeated Robertson's arguments to Lawrence, therefore, and instructed him to commence preparations necessary for an attack upon the enemy as soon, and as decisively, as possible. ³⁸ The General Staff of No.3 Section Canal Defence suddenly found themselves desperately trying to arrange mobility for sufficient numbers of their troops to make an attack upon the enemy position possible, therefore. ³⁹ But it was a desperate move, as Murray himself acknowledged in a private letter to Robertson. While he agreed he had to attack if the enemy did not move, the only plan he could offer was a straight assault by his infantry that might drive the Turks out of their trenches and so expose them to the ANZAC cavalry; but he was not enthusiastic about this: 'possibly I may fail because of my not having knocked the machine-guns out, broken the wire, or that the quality of my Territorial Infantry is not good enough.' ⁴⁰ These were

- ³⁷ Robertson to Murray 1 Aug. 1916, BM Add. MS 52461. On the subject of water see CIGS to Murray 23 July 1916, and the following comment by Murray: 'How these... Turks are getting on with Qatia water beats me.' Murray to Robertson 22 July 1916, Robertson papers I/32/40. The British still failed to realise, it seems, that they were not fighting a European opponent; the Turks did not care about the suffering caused to their men and their men, in turn, were accustomed to such harsh conditions.
- ³⁸ GHQ to GOC No.3 Section 24 July 1916, W. O. 95/4364.
- ³⁹ BGGS No.3 Section to 5 Mounted Brigade 25 July 1916, W. O. 95/4429.
- ⁴⁰ Murray to Robertson 27 July 1916, BM Add. MS 52461.

hardly the words of a man filled with enthusiasm for this venture and he more or less admitted as much by explaining that he would much rather he were attacked at Romani by double the current Turkish strength than have to make such an assault. And this sudden alteration in the EEF's objectives was creating friction and tension amongst its senior officers; the clash between Lawrence and Murray that had lain dormant for some weeks erupted once again as the pressure grew; indeed, so bad was this problem that Sir Archibald told Robertson Lawrence was 'jumpy' and if there was any doubt as to his state of mind then he would be replaced by General Dobell for the coming battle. ⁴¹ The pressure from London was telling; Murray had lost confidence in his senior commander and was in open dispute with him once more while the decision to attack that had been forced upon him filled him with little enthusiasm. It was not a happy state of affairs. ⁴² Nonetheless he fixed the date for the attack as 13 August, thus giving himself plenty of time to prepare and allowing his infantry the best chance of coping with the conditions since 'the moon will be favourable for an advance in the cool hours.' ⁴³ He also ordered the commander of No.2 Section to form a mobile column based upon the Imperial Camel Corps and intended to be available to threaten the enemy's left and rear. The suggestion was sound, but it had not been fully thought through because Murray had not made it clear who was responsible for this new unit; for example, he informed Lawrence that he was 'at liberty to suggest any movement' for this force but that it would remain under No.2 Section. ⁴⁴

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Murray Diary 23 July 1916: 'stormy interview with Lt.-Gen. Lawrence at 4.45 pm.'

⁴³ Summary of principal events in July 1916, W.O. 95/4364.

⁴⁴ GHQ to No.2 Section 28 July 1916 and GHQ to No.3 Section 29 July 1916, W.O. 95/4364.

The C in C made one set of arrangements of an offensive nature about which he was most enthusiastic. He knew there was a Turkish force of some one or two thousand men at El Arish and he therefore proposed an amphibious raid to destroy the town as a base, for two reasons: 'If successfully carried out... such an operation should materially assist Hejaz operations and also my own offensive against the Turkish Qatia force whose main line of supply would be interrupted.' ⁴⁵ One can see the attraction of such a raid for Murray: he would have been in occupation of - if only briefly - the very place that everyone was now urging him to reach; it was a daring venture, but not without very real advantages, for if the frontal assault upon the enemy position at Qatia failed then the EEF would still have a real achievement to offer the War Committee. But, of course, there were problems; Admiral Wemyss raised objections to the scheme - the difficulties inherent in landing and then re-embarking a force of over 3,000 men were, he felt, too great. Nonetheless, Murray still considered the element of risk 'well justified' and even Robertson liked the look of the scheme. ⁴⁶ However, at the War Committee meeting of 5 August when the CIGS broached the subject of the El Arish raid Admiral Jackson expressed similar concerns to those of Wemyss and only conditional approval was granted, the attack only being allowed if it could be carried out successfully according to the local conditions as adjudged by Wemyss and Murray. ⁴⁷ Unfortunately, the entire scheme had little future once the Turks finally attacked the British at Romani and were repulsed, since they retired on El Arish, thus making any raid there quite impracticable. ⁴⁸ Nevertheless, the scheme

⁴⁵ Murray to CIGS 1 Aug. 1916, WO 105/715.

⁴⁶ Chief Egypt ~~Force~~ to Chief London 3 Aug. 1916, WO 95/4365. CIGS to Murray 4 Aug. 1916, CAB 42/17/3.

⁴⁷ War Committee meeting 5 Aug. 1916, CAB 42/17/5.

⁴⁸ Murray to CIGS 7 Aug. 1916, WO 106/715. The Official History (p.182) rather overstates the case, for it claims that the CIGS 'cordially approved of the proposal' and only 'agreed with reluctance' to its abandonment; in fact, the CIGS always maintained that the raid could only be allowed if it offered prospects of success.

continued to influence those at the very highest reaches of British strategy for in mid-September Balfour was still under the impression that the advance to El Arish was to be by sea, and not land. ⁴⁹

The developments that destroyed Murray's cherished amphibious raid upon El Arish actually saved him from having to launch a desperate frontal assault upon Qatia which surely would have failed. And for this he had the enemy to thank. On 28 July there had been a 'distinct change' in the situation, for the Turks had started to renew their advance. ⁵⁰ Although up to the evening of 2 August it was still not clear whether the EEF or the enemy would strike first, by 3 August it was; the Turks were going to attack: 'the best possible thing that could happen to us' was the general opinion at GHQ. ⁵¹

What, then, was the nature of the plan drawn up by the British to deal with this fresh eventuality? The plan adopted was to be along the same lines as that already worked out by Murray and Lawrence before the Turks had halted. It was an elaborate plan - elaborate at least in so far as it was designed to entice the enemy into the EEF's clutches; though, as it transpired, such elaboration was scarcely necessary, for the Turks seemed determined to march straight into this well-laid trap. Ignorant of this fact, GHQ ordered the RFC to keep the advancing enemy under observation 'without in any way interfering with their progress', while the forward movement of its freshly-created mobile column of No.2 Section was deliberately delayed until 4 August in order not to 'attract the enemy's attention to the presence of troops on his southern flank.' ⁵² Measures such as these certainly encouraged the enemy in

⁴⁹ War Committee meeting 18 Sep. 1916, CAB 42/20/3.

⁵⁰ McGrigor Diary 28 July 1916.

⁵¹ Murray's Despatches. Second Despatch 1 Oct. 1916, p. 63. McGrigor Diary 3 Aug. 1916.

⁵² 'Despatch dealing with the work of the RFC on the Suez Canal front during the operations between 19 July and 12 Aug. 1916' 17 Aug. 1916 and 'Operations carried out in No.2 Section during August 1916' by General Dallas 11 Sept. 1916, W.O. 95/4449.

his advance, but they also brought with them certain disadvantages: the initial advance by the Turks was on a larger scale than had been expected, which consequently placed greater pressure upon the EEF's screen of mounted troops in front of Romani; moreover, the delayed movement of the mobile column was destined seriously to restrict its role in the coming battle. ⁵³

Once the enemy were enticed on to the British defences at Romani then further measures had been planned to channel the Turks to precisely where GHQ wanted them. The obvious weak point in the EEF's position was what appeared to be its open right flank and the deliberate intention was to lead the enemy towards this right flank. In this area the plans stressed the need for a 'gap' between the Katib Gannit position and Dueidar so as to invite the enemy to become involved amidst the dunes in this region, thus making any subsequent retirement by them far more difficult. ⁵⁴ Once the Turks were heavily committed in the attack they were to be taken in the flank by No.3 Section's mounted troops and the 3rd L.H. Brigade while the mobile column moved to threaten their flank and rear. In order to give reality to the 'gap' in the British line on its right flank the continuance of the line was concealed. No trenches were dug along four miles of the line at this point so that nothing could be observed from the air, but telephone lines had been laid and the officers of the 1st and 2nd L.H. Brigades had acquainted themselves with the terrain. Major-General Chauvel had command of these units and upon him lay the responsibility of holding the enemy up until the rest of the mounted troops attacked the enemy's flank.

⁵³ Murray has been criticised for keeping the mobile column too far back but in fact this was, as we have seen, his deliberate intention. See Hill, p.74. Hill fails to grasp Murray's deliberate intention.

⁵⁴ 'Tactical comments on the action at Romani, 4 and 5 Aug.' by Lynden-Bell 26 Aug 1916, Murray papers 79/48/3.

This, then, was the plan - and it was a good one, but there is some doubt as to who originally devised it. The Official History calls it 'Murray's plan', while a claim has been made for General Lawrence's authorship. ⁵⁵ Lawrence's authorship seems a little unlikely since he certainly did not abide by it in the final analysis, as we shall see, and his consistent attitude seems to have been one of caution, while the plan did not allow for ^{on} this part of the senior commander involved. Nor is the plan clearly Murray's invention, for there is strong evidence to suggest that Guy Dawnay had quite a bit to do with the 'skilful dispositions' taken up by the British troops while Lawrence's own staff undoubtedly did some of the more detailed work on the ground. ⁵⁶ What seems to have happened is that the final plan was drawn up after a considerable number of conferences and meetings between Murray and Lawrence and their respective staffs. ⁵⁷ Nonetheless, the C in C was ultimately responsible for the adoption of any plan, and he always remained absolutely clear as to what he hoped ^{for} from the battle and how he saw it developing so, to a great extent, the Official History has got it right and Sir Archibald deserves praise for the successful manner by which he and his staff created such a good plan.

Just how good this plan was can be proved by a brief examination of the intentions and actions of the enemy. All accounts of the battle argue that Murray's anticipation at Romani was 'exceptional' and some have even been driven to hyperbole in order to describe his success on

⁵⁵ Official History, p.183. S.H. Kershaw, 'The battle of Romani, 4 Aug. 1916', Army Quarterly, XXXVII (1938).

⁵⁶ G. Garsia, A key to victory: a study of war planning (London, 1940), pp.56-57. Fergusson to D'Ewes 6 Aug. 1916, Fergusson papers DEF/4.

⁵⁷ Murray Diary. See entries mid-July - early Aug. 1916 for all these conferences.

4 August before a shot had been fired:

History scarcely presents an example of such complete conformity by an enemy taking the offensive to the plans and wishes of the defender. At Romani Murray and his leaders in the field anticipated in detail the course followed by the Turks. ⁵⁹

As if Kress von Kressenstein, who commanded the Turkish forces, had read the same script of a play in which both he and Murray were acting he seemed 'fully prepared to play the role allotted' to him by GHQ so that his plan of attack turned out to be precisely what had been expected at Romani and Ismailia. ⁶⁰ He intended to shell the defensive works at Romani and launch only a weak infantry assault against them while his main attack would be against the EEF's right and rear. But Kress was labouring under a series of disadvantages. His intelligence was doubly at fault - and this nearly proved fatal to the survival of his force: firstly, the strength and nature of the British troops at Romani were grossly under-estimated with the consequence that captured Turkish troops claimed they had only expected cavalry; secondly, Kress and his staff clearly had little idea of the true extent of the actual position at Romani and, ironically, (according to a captured German officer's map) did not realise that the 'gap' on the British right was not genuine, but merely a creation of Murray's to lead the enemy to their doom. ⁶⁰ Kress and his men, had, therefore, been most successfully deceived by Sir Archibald's elaborate plan and they marched straight into a trap.

⁵⁹ Australian Official History, pp.117 & 131. Hill, p.76. The expressed views of Hill and the Australian Official History are doubly significant since neither account is particularly favourable to Murray elsewhere - as one would expect, given the Australian perspective of both works - and yet both praise the C in C extravagantly at this stage.

⁵⁹ Official History, pp.184-185.

⁶⁰ 'Intelligence notes on the engagement at Qatia.' July - Aug. 1916, Murray papers 79/48/3. W.D. Intelligence Section. G.S. EEF 7 Aug. 1916, W.O. 157/707.

But why march at all in the middle of the summer when the Sinai was a blistering wilderness? What was Kress up to? GHQ certainly found difficulty in deciding what the Turks were really trying to do and admitted, after the battle, 'there is no indication of what the enemy really intended to do in attacking us.' ⁶¹ This inability to discover what the Germans and Turks intended caused the British to dismiss the expedition as some kind of futile gesture or 'a forlorn hope', as Robertson later described it. ⁶² Comments like these have led writers to play down the importance of the Turkish attack when, in fact, the events of early August 1916 marked a turning-point in the Sinai campaign, for never again would the Turks take the offensive in this theatre. ⁶³

Nonetheless, the EEF believed they could make out some of the enemy's intentions once the engagement had ended: 'The general idea seems to have been to defeat our troops at Romani and establish a port there. By this the enemy would prevent us sending any more troops to any other front and might be able at least temporarily to interfere with navigations through the Canal'. ⁶⁴ To take the best point first - interference with the Canal - this was not so outlandish as it might initially seem, for the enemy force was known to be well-equipped with heavy artillery that would have been able to shell the Canal and harass its shipping from some distance; and only a few hours heavy bombardment might potentially have done a great deal of damage. ⁶⁵ As for keeping British troops in Egypt, this was a consistent objective of German policy in the region. It seems most unlikely, therefore, that the objective of the enterprise was to throw the British back over the Canal, as Kress

⁶¹ 'Intelligence notes on the engagement at Qatia', op.cit.

⁶² Robertson II, p.152.

⁶³ Official History, p.369. From now on the Turks had lost the initiative in the Sinai and they never regained it from the EEF, which subsequently dictated the course of events.

⁶⁴ W.D. Intelligence Section No.2 Section 6 Aug. 1916, W.O. 157/742.

⁶⁵ 'Report of an inhabitant of Athlit, Mount Carmel, Syria' 1 Nov. 1916, L/MIL/5/735.

later claimed. ⁶⁶ Correctly divining German and Turkish intentions is made especially difficult by the degree of friction that had arisen between Djemal Pasha and Kress. According to the Turkish commander the attack was Kress's idea because the troops under his command had become frustrated by the long wait for action. ⁶⁷ This version of events seems to find confirmation in the information gleaned from enemy prisoners after the battle who believed that the attack had been made prematurely and should not have really taken place until October but for the fact that Kress had forced an early advance upon Djemal by the threat of his resignation. ⁶⁸ Significantly, therefore, Murray could take comfort from the fact that his was not the only command that suffered from serious friction caused by personality clashes; his opponents had similar problems, although their difficulties were exacerbated by a clash of nationalities, but unlike the EEF's difficulties their disagreements reached such a level that they became public knowledge, even as far away as Cairo! ⁶⁹

But there were other elements to the Turkish attack of 4 August that gave it a more threatening appearance. One reason given for the advance by the population of Egypt was that the Turks 'confidently relied on co-operation from within Egypt'. ⁷⁰ And they were correct; in May 1916 British officers uncovered a plot to organise a rising in Egypt simultaneously with a Turkish attack in the Sinai, while early in July the British received news that the Egyptian people would be asked to create disturbances in their country to assist their Ottoman allies. ⁷¹ So seriously did Sir Archibald take this threat that he immediately

⁶⁶ Kress, p. 506.

⁶⁷ Djemal Pasha, p. 171.

⁶⁸ 'Intelligence notes on the engagement at Qatia,' op.cit.

⁶⁹ 22 Aug. 1916, W.O. 157/707. Clayton to Wingate 24 Aug. 1916, Wingate papers 139/6/21. According to reports received at Cairo, Kress had to face a Turkish court of inquiry after the battle!

⁷⁰ 'What is said in the Bazaars on the recent action at Qatia,' by Captain Beales 9 Aug. 1916, Murray papers 79/48/3.

⁷¹ E. Elath, N. Bentwich, D. May (eds.), Memories of Sir Wyndham Deedes, (London, 1958), p. 17. W.O. 158/602: Report of Captain Cornwallis on mission to Jeddah, 8 July 1916.

warned his Inspector General of Communications to be ready to stop all leave and keep his men available in case of 'internal trouble' on 20 July, the day after Kress's force was observed for the first time. ⁷²

In fact, the Turkish advance to battle at the end of July and stretching into August should be seen as a dangerous threat to the EEF in its quest of clearing the Sinai. For one thing, the Turkish soldier was far more able to adjust to the intense heat of the Sinai in the summer than his British opponent and the chances are that if the EEF had not been so well-prepared at Romani they might well have found themselves in serious difficulties against the tenacious enemy infantry. Moreover, there can be little doubt that in such circumstances the potential British assault, if ever launched, would surely have been a fiasco. Nor was the strength of Kress's force to be sniffed at; it was a formidable unit and has not received the recognition it deserves because it met a still more formidable opponent in prepared positions. Kress's total strength was about 15,000, including a stiffening of German troops from a unit code-named 'Pasha' with a machine-gun battalion and heavy artillery; there was also an Austrian contingent of two mounted howitzer batteries. ⁷³ The EEF was aware of the German contingent in Kress's force although it was initially confused by its size to such an extent that the suggestion was seriously made that the Turkish soldiers were wearing German helmets! ⁷⁴

⁷² C in C to I.G.C. 20 July 1916, W.O. 95/4364.

⁷³ Official History, p.202.

⁷⁴ 29 July 1916, W.O. 157/742, Murray to CIGS 4 Aug. 1916, CAB 42/17/3.

FIGHTING THE BATTLE OF ROMANI AND THE FAILURE TO DESTROY THE ENEMY FORCE

The battle itself began at about 2 a.m. on 4 August when the Turkish attack upon the British position at Romani commenced. As day dawned the sunlight revealed to the enemy just how lightly held was the EEF's right flank and Kress pushed his men forward with increased vigour into the much-vaunted 'gap'. Matters became worrying for the mounted troops covering this region of the British line since the enemy was coming forward with more strength than had been expected; but even so Kress's men were now tired and after an energetic attack had consumed most of their water - and crucially, they were also heavily involved with the British right flank.

Meanwhile at 8 a.m. Kress launched a frontal attack upon the main position held by the 52nd Division commanded by Major-General W.E.B. Smith. This attack soon ground to a halt and made little headway. General Lawrence at Qantara, becoming aware of the developing situation, began to issue his orders, but given the strength of the Turkish attack he decided to alter his dispositions and not follow the original plan of battle. At 7.25 a.m. the GOC No.3 Section ordered his additional mounted troops in reserve (intended to strike the enemy in the flank) to positions designed to strengthen the hard-pressed Light Horse Brigades who had borne the brunt of the fighting so far; this 'had the effect of considerably weakening our powers to strike behind the outer flank and at the rear of the enemy's enveloping attack', since all the mounted troops now engaged the Turks frontally. ⁷⁵

At 10 a.m. General Chauvel requested whether the 156th Brigade of the 52nd Division in reserve at Romani could not move up to relieve his mounted troops so that they might water their horses and then swing round Kress's left flank, but these fresh infantry would not budge since they were under the GOC of the 53rd Division and awaited his order to

⁷⁵ 'Tactical comments on the action at Romani, 4 and 5 Aug. 1916' by Lynden-Bell 26 Aug. 1916, Murray papers 79/48/3.

counter-attack.

Nevertheless, as the reinforcements of mounted troops made their way forward the British were able to move on to the offensive. By 6 p.m. New Zealander and Yeomanry cavalry, supported by the leading battalions of the 127th Brigade of the 42nd Division, that had made their way forward from Pelusium Station, captured a strong Turkish force after a stiff fight on the Turkish left. In conjunction with this attack by the mounted troops General Smith ordered the 156th Brigade forward for an assault upon the Turkish position to the left of the mounted troops on a feature known as Wellington Ridge. But encroaching darkness and heavy enemy defensive fire caused this attack to be halted until the following day.

So ended the first day of the Battle of Romani - and it ended quite favourably for the British. Writing the day after, Dawnay admitted that on 4 August the Turkish left had seemed doomed and it looked as if 'the whole Turkish force might have been "scuppered"'. ⁷⁶ Murray certainly agreed with Dawnay for he telephoned Lawrence and stressed the need for troops to be pushed forward so that Kress's flank could be threatened and his chance of escape blocked. Other encouraging news was reaching GHQ as well; according to the latest estimates 1,000 Turkish troops had been captured and these men 'appeared to be worn out and very ready to surrender'. On the other hand, Lawrence offered a more cautious view of future developments; he explained to the C in C that the heavy ground, exhausted horses and lack of water made any strong encircling movement of the enemy forces 'difficult' - but he promised to do his best 'wherever possible'. ⁷⁷ Lawrence's misgivings were significant

⁷⁶ Dawnay diary 5 Aug. 1916.

⁷⁷ Telephone message to No.3 Section 4 Aug. 1916 and Narrative of Operations 4 Aug. 1916. Received by telephone from No.3 Section 4 Aug. 1916, W.O. 95/4365.

and would play an important role in future events. Meanwhile, arrangements for the re-organisation and watering of all units ready for a rapid advance on 5 August were collapsing under the pressure. For example, some of the mounted troops withdrew to Pelusium Station on the evening of 4 August where, at the same time and in the same place, the brigades of the 42nd Division were assembling; predictably the result was chaotic, as the War Diary of the 125th Brigade records: 'The night being dark, the watering arrangements inadequate, and no arrangements having been made to allot areas to larger formations beforehand, there was a good deal of confusion.' ⁷⁸ So although from GHQ's perspective there was 'yet a possibility of destroying the opposing force', at No. 3 Section's HQ at Qantara the problems were mounting as the need for rapid action became more urgent. ⁷⁹

Lawrence issued orders for a general advance at 4 a.m. on 5 August. The Wellington Ridge position was taken, but it now became clear that this had been manned by only a rear guard force and that the enemy was now in full retreat. The general mounted advance did not begin until 10.30 a.m. because the men were scattered after their watering of the night before. But the infantry were delayed still further and their advance in the sand and heat became a nightmare. It would not be too strong a statement to make to say that the 42nd Division started to disintegrate under these conditions; it was made up of a lot of men of less than average height who found they were unable to carry their full equipment in the heavy sand, and others who had been gassed and who - it was believed - would benefit from the Sinai climate; needless to say they did not. ⁸⁰ That the EEF had to make use of such a unit in such a vital role reveals just how desperately short of troops Murray really was. According to the division's official records the 125th Brigade

⁷⁸ W.D. HQ 125th Infantry Brigade, 42nd Division 4 Aug. 1916, W.O. 95/4594.

⁷⁹ Official History, p. 190.

⁸⁰ Chaytor to Director, Historical Section, C.I.D. 26 Oct. 1925, CAB 45/78.

alone had lost 300 men to heat exhaustion by 11.15 a.m. on 5 August. ⁸⁴ The 52nd Division, although generally a much fitter unit, also suffered in these conditions and, in fact, from now on the British infantry played little part in the subsequent pursuit of the enemy. On 6 August, for example, Lawrence ordered both divisions to support the mounted troops as they engaged a strong Turkish force at Oghratina; but, in the words of the Official History, 'there was never the remotest chance' they would be able to do this. ⁸² Nevertheless, for the 42nd Division this meant a further nightmarish march and one brigade had to leave nearly 1,000 men behind since they were 'not considered fit enough for desert operations.' ⁸³ It was all that the infantry could do to reach the line assigned to them; they could go no further. The condition of the infantry continued to be a source of some anxiety for the GOC No.3 Section and his entire force. Search parties had to be organised to search for the men who had fallen out due to heat exhaustion and not arrived at the front line; some of these started to turn up at Pelusium, Romani and Qantara throughout August. ⁸⁴ Murray tried to play down the extent of the failure of his infantry and in a telegram to the CIGS sent on 8 August he described the situation as 'quite satisfactory', and the health of the troops as 'good but there will be a reaction'. ⁸⁵

⁸⁴ 5 Aug. 1916, W.O. 95/4594, op.cit. The Official History (pp.192-193) is remarkably candid about the failure of the British infantry, perhaps because it was so obvious!

⁸² Official History, p.195.

⁸³ 5 Aug. 1916, W.O. 95/4594, op.cit.

⁸⁴ W.D. HQ 42nd Division Administrative ('A' Branch) 7 & 8 Aug. 1916, W.O. 95/4591.

⁸⁵ Murray to CIGS 8 Aug. 1916, Murray papers 79/48/3. Murray did refer to the poor condition of his infantry in this telegram but the general tenor of the message is optimistic; significantly, the Official History quotes this telegram but omits the section which mentions the infantry (p.201).

Meanwhile the mounted troops had continued the pursuit and attacked a strong Turkish rear guard at Qatia on 5 August. But the enemy were too well supported and Chauvel's men could not make an impression without the support of the infantry. Events took a similar course on 7 August as the cavalry were unable to overcome the Turks at Oghratina, who had retired further east since the action at Qatia. Finally, on 9 August Chauvel tried to catch the enemy now at Bir el Abd but, once again, the mounted troops did not have the firepower to overwhelm the Turks, who were able to evacuate the position and return to El Arish. So ended the battle of Romani.

Immediate reaction to Romani was mixed. There were those who were mightily impressed with the EEF's achievements at Romani - and said so. Murray received congratulations from an illustrious group of men including King George, the CIGS, General Haig, the Sultan of Egypt and the entire War Committee. ⁸⁶ In Mesopotamia, moreover, the Intelligence Section of the Indian Expeditionary Force seemed to be over-awed at the number of prisoners captured by the EEF in the battle and, according to the same source, the Turkish 3rd Division was 'nearly destroyed' as a result. ⁸⁷ But even success created problems, since this fresh influx of over 3,000 prisoners into Egypt necessitated the extension of the existing p.o.w. camps because they were not large enough to cope with so many men. ⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Official congratulations on the engagement at Romani from the King, Sultan of Egypt, CIGS, Sirdar of the Sudan, Egyptian Minister of War, General Haig and the War Committee, Murray papers 79/48/3.

⁸⁷ W.D. Intelligence Section GHQ IEFD 8 & 29 Aug. 1916, W.O. 157/790.

⁸⁸ Director of Works, EEF, to Maj.-Gen. Scott-Moncrieff 10 Sept. 1916, W.O. 161/36.

In terms of casualties alone, then, Kress had certainly been dealt a serious blow, for he seems to have lost as many as 9,000 men to the EEF's 1,130. ⁸⁹ Nevertheless, Sir Archibald committed his true feelings to paper in a private note written after the battle was over: 'I am bitterly disappointed', was his conclusion. ⁹⁰ Murray's disappointment was tinged with bitterness because he considered one man - and one man alone - responsible for the failure of the EEF to annihilate an enemy force that 'had given itself into his hands'; that man was General Lawrence. Although Murray mentioned none of his misgivings in his official despatch this did not mean that his criticisms of the man were not real and considerable. ⁹¹ Privately, Sir Archibald believed Lawrence had been timid and reluctant to move; he had placed his reserves too far in the rear in spite of 'repeated advice' to bring them further up; he had failed to inculcate the necessary 'spirit of offensive' into his men; and, most reprehensible of all, he had had 'more than a fortnight to prepare for an attack which came exactly as anticipated' and yet he still did not manage to succeed. ⁹² Moreover, while Lawrence's performance has been defended, he himself actually admitted that he had made a number of mistakes. ⁹³

But Lawrence could not be blamed for everything - nor should he be. For example, he has been blamed for failing to move the

- ⁸⁹ Official History, p. 199. The Germans claimed the losses at Romani were only 6,000, which is interesting, since this is the figure Murray gave initially before upgrading it to 9,000. See Murray to Robertson 12 Aug. 1916, B.M. Add. MS 52461 and Murray to CIGS 17 Aug. 1916, Murray papers 79/48/3.
- ⁹⁰ General Herbert A. Lawrence. Note by Murray Aug. 1916, Murray papers 79/48/3.
- ⁹¹ Murray Despatches. 2nd. Despatch 1 Oct. 1916, p. 73.
- ⁹² Gen. Herbert A. Lawrence. Note by Murray, op. cit.
- ⁹³ Kershaw, art. cit. Lawrence to Lynden-Bell 28 Aug. 1916, Murray papers 79/48/3. Lawrence's admission of culpability is not direct, but is inherent in his statement that Lynden-Bell's memorandum on Romani giving Murray's version of the battle was 'substantially correct'. See 'Tactical comments on the action at Romani', op. cit.

42nd Division further forward before the battle; but this was largely academic since, as we have seen, these men proved incapable of fighting a serious engagement in desert conditions; indeed, Murray could be criticised for ever wanting to use this division at all. The collapse of the infantry was an important factor in Lawrence's failure to destroy the retiring enemy for it robbed the mounted troops of desperately needed support in any attack upon entrenched forces. Moreover, Kress organised a very skilful retreat based upon successive lines of defence which helped to protect his men from the British cavalry. Nor was the climate exactly conducive to a rapid pursuit by any of Lawrence's troops, especially when many of these men were quite unprepared for the heat that greeted them (100° in the shade), while their opponents had at least more experience of these conditions.

Murray, himself, also made some mistakes. He can be criticised for adopting a somewhat ambiguous attitude to the command of the battle, for although he had delegated this to Lawrence he nonetheless constantly sought to be involved by urging his advice upon the general over the phone. What is more, Lawrence did not even have over-all command of all the EEF's forces involved at Romani, for the mobile column remained under No.2 Section and consequently did not co-operate adequately with the main forces; we ought not to be surprised, therefore, that this unit played only a negligible part in the battle. 94 General Chauvel did not get everything right either, and his handling of the mounted troops is open to some criticism; his tactics were not all they could have been and in the pursuit his men tended to lose touch too easily with the enemy so that the enemy's rear-guard was able to slip away twice. 95 Finally, the operations of the EEF during this battle were

94 Hill, p.83. These are the views of General Chauvel and therefore are of value since he was the third most important figure in the battle on the British side after Murray and Lawrence.

95 Memorandum by Gen. Street 22 Aug. 1916, W.O. 95/4429.

bedevilled by poor communications between various units thus making the co-ordination of attacks most difficult and causing vital delays in the execution of the most urgent orders. ⁹⁶ It is one of the features of the EEF up to April 1917 that its communication network was not all it should have been. The most obvious explanation for this is a lack of experienced staff officers; but whatever its cause, its effect was to aggravate still further any existing defects in the command-structure - a point of some importance, for Murray would soon alter his entire scheme of command in Egypt and the Sinai, thus placing a greater than ever pressure upon the EEF's staff officers.

⁹⁶ A. Kearsey, The operations in Egypt and Palestine illustrating the Field Service Regulations (London. 1929), p. 74.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE ENGAGEMENT

Much to the surprise of GHQ the Battle of Romani caused a considerable amount of tension with the Australian troops of the EEF. One cause of this tension seems to have been a failure in the facilities provided for the Australian wounded after the battle. According to the Australian Official History the arrangements for the transport of its wounded men from the railhead to Qantara were 'deplorable' and a repeat of the 'Mesopotamia scandals' on a 'small scale'. 97 What seems to have particularly angered the Australians was that their wounded were evacuated in open trucks while the enemy prisoners used normal trains. However, the charge that No.3 Section was solely responsible for this iniquitous state of affairs cannot be sustained, for there also appears to have been a collapse in the regimental machinery amongst the Australian units so that their own medical teams were not doing all they could. 98 In reality, all the medical services did none too well during and after Romani and it was not only the Australian troops who suffered. For example, those units which used the Egyptian Labour Corps to provide stretcher bearers soon discovered that they had made a mistake, for these men were 'not reliable under fire' 99 Moreover, the 42nd Division discovered that their Field Ambulances were left behind once the advance began because these units simply could not move fast enough. 100 Even more worrying for the troops, if only they had known, was that there was only one consulting surgeon in the whole of Egypt and he was assigned to the General Hospital at Port Said! 101 Finally - and herein lay

- 97 Australian Official History, p.162.
- 98 Falls to MacMunn. MS note no date and Chaytor to Director, Historical Section 22 Oct. 1925, CAB 45/78.
- 99 Lt.- Gen. No.3 Section to CGS GHQ 20 Aug. 1916, W.O. 95/4429.
- 100 W.D. Assistant Director Medical Services 42nd Division 5 Aug. 1916, W.O. 95/4591.
- 101 Col. Tulby to Curzon 12 Sept. 1916, Curzon papers MSS Eur F112/112a.

real shades of Mesopotamia - there had been an outbreak of cholera amongst the troops after the battle and a conference was held at which precautions were outlined and the organisation of a vaccination programme laid down. ¹⁰²

But there was a second and perhaps still more galling incident that soured relations still further between GHQ and the Australian contingent of the EEF. Even though Murray praised these men lavishly for their role in the Battle of Romani in telegrams that described their 'great steadfastness, gallantry and untiring energy', a feeling arose in the EEF that Chauvel's men did not gain the recognition for their efforts that they deserved - a feeling held very strongly by Chauvel's men themselves, of course! ¹⁰³ In fact, this may have been a reaction to Sir Archibald's style of command; he did not seem to relish personal interviews and often left his C G S, Lynden-Bell, the task of congratulating senior officers, so that the officers concerned could be left with the impression that Murray had not even been interested. ¹⁰⁴ But the Australian complaint went deeper than this. They felt that in his official despatch of October 1916 the C in C gave the impression that the brunt of the fighting at Romani had been borne by the British infantry; this made them doubly angry, for their senior officers knew of Murray's telegrams of praise. ¹⁰⁵ Another matter that rankled with Chauvel and his men was the way in which they received no recognition for their efforts at Romani in the form of awards; however, in truth this had partly been caused by Chauvel himself, who had refused to be decorated once he became aware of the slight he considered his men

¹⁰² 10 & 11 Aug. 1916, W.O. 95/4591. Cholera was probably contracted by drinking dirty water in the Sinai. See GHQ to GOC No. 3 Section 13 Aug. 1916.

¹⁰³ Murray papers 79/48/3: Murray to Governor-General, Melbourne 21 Aug. 1916.

¹⁰⁴ It seems Chauvel himself suffered in just this manner and his comment is revealing: 'I think that the Commander-in-Chief might have given his congratulations to me in person.' See Elgood, p. 229.

¹⁰⁵ Hill, p. 85. Australian Official History, p. 192. Murray's Despatches, Second Despatch 1 Oct. 1916, pp. 73-74.

had received in the official despatch. Even when Chauvel was awarded the K.C.M.G. early in 1917 no mention was made of Romani, so that the bitterness remained. ¹⁰⁶

But what, then, of the enemy for whom the action had been intended, after all? Mark Sykes, viewing events from London, put his finger on the results of this failure of Lawrence to catch Kress:

The Turks will lay stress on the fact that the action was offensive, and fought on enemy soil; should, however, the fighting result in the destruction of their expedition, movement in Syria may be expected. ¹⁰⁷

But the expedition was not destroyed and it was able to carry its own version of the battle back to Syria. Worse still, it soon became clear that the enemy had 'evidently not been much demoralised by the losses they sustained in the reconnaissance at Romani' ¹⁰⁸ With considerable skill the Turks even managed to turn the one tangible evidence of a British success at Romani - the large numbers of enemy prisoners - to their advantage in the propaganda war. General Townshend, a prisoner of the enemy himself after the defeat of his Indian army at Kut, wrote to Lord Curzon explaining that Ottoman officials had complained to him about the way in which their men in Egypt were being treated. This was a matter of some concern for the British, since the remnants of Townshend's army were prisoners of the Turks and they feared their men could become the victims of reprisals if the poor treatment in Egypt continued. Townshend, therefore, asked Curzon to raise the matter in London. ¹⁰⁹ In fact, there was no truth in the Turkish charges, as Townshend himself suspected, since Murray went out of his way to treat

¹⁰⁶ Hill, pp.94-95.

¹⁰⁷ 'Appreciation of attached Arab Report No. IV' by Sykes 9 Aug. 1916, CAB 17/177.

¹⁰⁸ 'Appreciation of attached Arab Report No. VII' by Sykes 30 Aug. 1916, CAB 17/177.

¹⁰⁹ Townshend to Curzon 15 Oct. 1916, Curzon papers MSS Eur F112/112b.

his prisoners in a most gentlemanly fashion. ¹⁰⁰ And, although Townshend did not realise it, his men were already suffering under horrible conditions that would kill many of them; so the entire affair actually changed little, though to a European democracy concerned about its image the matter seemed more serious than it was.

The British, just like the Turks, tried to gain the maximum propaganda value from Romani. Robertson told Murray he expected that such a battle would 'have a good effect in rendering Egypt a fairly easy place to look after for some time to come.' ¹¹⁰ Nor was Murray unaware of his duty to milk Romani for every ounce of propaganda: 'I have been most careful to make the most of the result obtained with the Delta population, the Senussi and the Sherif.' ¹¹²

The large number of prisoners captured by the EEF at Romani proved of some value to the British because they offered a fresh source of intelligence upon enemy intentions and troop movements. The new information obtained from these men was shared with the Indian force in Mesopotamia in an attempt to gain an overall impression of the location of all Turkish units in the Sinai, Syria and Mesopotamia, and an understanding of the nature of these units. ¹¹³ Mesopotamia and Egypt co-operated in this manner in an effort to assist the war against the Turk - a war that relied upon accurate intelligence since it took place over vast and differing geographical regions amongst peoples of various cultures and languages.

¹⁰⁰ McGrigor Diary 5 Aug. 1916.

¹¹⁰ Robertson to Murray 15 Aug. 1916, Robertson papers I/32/43.

¹¹² Murray to Robertson 12 Aug. 1916, B. M. Add. MS 52461.

¹¹³ C in C India to Officer in charge Intelligence, Cairo 14 Aug. 1916. Officer in charge Intelligence, Cairo to C in C India 17 Aug. 1916. GOC in C Egypt to C in C India 28 Aug. 1916, L/MIL/17/5/3913.

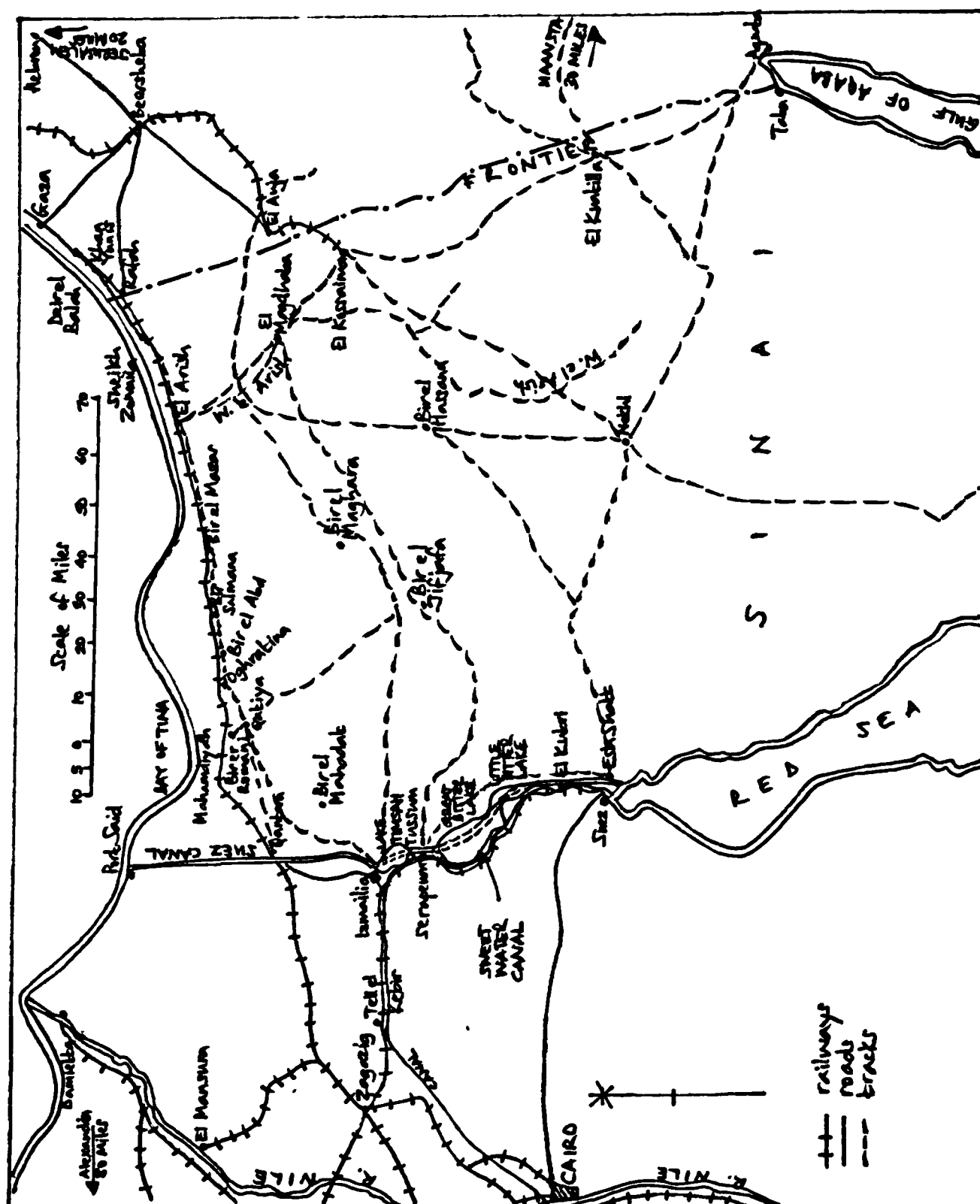
The immediate impact of Romani upon the EEF was not dramatic. The Sinai railway was delayed for only 24 days. In fact, Murray told General Lawrence as early as 8 August that the result of the battle had 'in no way altered' his policy of a gradual forward movement across the Sinai. ¹¹⁴ But there had been a significant change, one that meant a phase of the Sinai campaign had come to an end. For, as it subsequently transpired, the enemy had made their final assault upon Egypt and even their final advance into Sinai; there would never again be a battle like Romani in this campaign with the Turks on the offensive; from now on Murray would be on the offensive at all times.

The battle also seemed to have a most encouraging effect amongst the British troops in France who tended to see it as one more example of the gradual and inevitable success of the Allies as they slowly pushed the Germans back at the Somme. ¹¹⁵ In London, moreover, the War Committee appeared uncommonly pleased with the battle and the CIGS was requested to wire Murray 'expressing... satisfaction with the complete success of his recent operations against the Turkish forces.' ¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ GHQ to GOC No3 Section 8 Aug. 1916, W.O. 95/4365.

¹¹⁵ A. Home, The Diary of a World War I Cavalry Officer (London, 1985), p.117. Home was a cavalry officer and, therefore, very interested in Romani as a cavalry action.

¹¹⁶ War Committee meeting 18 Aug. 1916, CAB 42/17/11.



MAP No. 5: ROUTES ACROSS THE SINAI

CHAPTER 10

MURRAY COMPLETES THE OCCUPATION OF SINAI:
SEPTEMBER 1916 - JANUARY 1917

'I had no great opinion of him as a general, however, though he deserves full credit for his organisation of the advance across Sinai; and I have said so.'

General Wavell on Murray 2 February 1939

THE REORGANISATION OF THE EEF AFTER ROMANI AND THE MOVE OF GHQ TO CAIRO

No sooner had the sand settled after the Battle of Romani than Murray initiated a major and far-reaching reorganisation of the EEF. He informed Robertson that he intended to move his headquarters from Ismailia to Cairo and to create a complete corps headquarters for the command of the troops in the Sinai to replace the improvised section headquarters which had fought the actions at Qatia and Romani.¹ This was no sudden decision, as indeed might be suggested by the speed with which it followed Romani; rather it was one that had been forced upon the C in C by pressure of work and the overwhelmingly consistent advice of his subordinates at GHQ and the civilian authorities in Egypt. He had warned the CIGS before Romani - on 2 August - that he saw no reason why he should not move his GHQ to Cairo once the current operations had been successfully concluded and the enemy had been driven back to the edge of the Sinai. This, then, was one reason for the particular timing of the decision to move GHQ - a decision, in fact, that did not bear

¹ Murray to Robertson 18 Aug. 1916, Robertson papers I/32/45. There is some confusion as to date on this subject; the Official History (p. 243) gives 17 Aug. as the date on which Murray informed London of his decision - but this is problematical since the letter of 18 Aug. cited above is unofficial and designed to ascertain the CIGS's private feelings upon the matter before Murray raised it officially.

fruit until 23 October 1916, when GHQ finally opened in Cairo. ² Part of the cause for this delay was the fact that the Egyptian Government and the High Commissioner were on holiday in Alexandria; another was that Murray had to secure the War Office's approval for his scheme, which proved to be no problem since the CIGS gave the C in C a free hand to do what he considered most suitable for his command, though he did admit that he had been unaware Ismailia 'was not considered the best place for your GHQ'. ³

This was a dramatic about-face for the C in C who in the early days of his time in Egypt had strongly advocated and indeed practised the role of an energetic leader moving amongst his men at the front line; in fact, even in early August he still talked as if this was attitude to generalship: 'If I had not been... in close touch with the operations on the Eastern Frontier, things would never have reached the advanced stage they have. I personally know every inch of the Sinai front... without personal supervision and hard driving not a fraction of the work done... would have been accomplished'. ⁴ What had happened then, to change his mind and make him amenable to a new style of leadership?

One factor was undoubtedly the pressure of work forced upon him by the internal affairs of Egypt. Once the immediate danger of invasion had subsided the foreign representatives demanded the full exercise of their rights in Egypt even when these clashed with the requirements of martial law - and it was, of course, Murray's job to administer martial law. But these problems were intensified by the EEF's staff. Since the large

² Murray to Robertson 2 Aug. 1916, Robertson papers I/32/42. Again there are problems with the date; the EEF War Diary gives the date for the move of GHQ given in the text above (see 23 Oct. 1916, W.O. 95/4366), while the Official History states that the GHQ opened in Cairo on 18 Oct. (p. 244). The solution to this discrepancy may lie in the fact that GHQ took a number of days to move all of its personnel and offices to Cairo.

³ Robertson to Murray 15 Aug. 1916, Robertson papers I/32/43.

⁴ Murray to Robertson 2 Aug. 1916, Robertson papers I/32/42.

number of troops originally stationed in Egypt early in 1916 had dwindled to a relatively small number in August and September 1916 they found themselves with a great deal of spare time, spare time they could use to tighten up and straighten out the enforcement of martial law in detail. There followed a series of cases in which foreign nationals were arrested under martial law, after which their representatives protested to the C in C. They protested not so much at Murray's right to enforce martial law, but at the determination of his staff to enforce it in the most trivial circumstances. All this 'proved too much for the patience of our C in C and produced an outburst on his part'.⁵ In fact, the EEF was convinced it was being treated very poorly indeed owing to the 'intransigent attitude' of the foreign representatives: 'Protest after protest has been levelled at our heads on every conceivable action'.⁶

In order to deal with such confrontations the C in C and some of his staff found themselves having to travel to Alexandria or Cairo to meet the protesters in person. This was hardly conducive to successful operations in the Sinai, nor did it lead to a settled policy towards foreign nationals and the implementation of martial law in Egypt; it was, in other words, a complete fiasco. Meanwhile, the C in C's health was suffering under the intense pressure of work he found himself facing; in September one eyewitness described him as badly in need of a rest, while another thought Murray was 'fagged out' because of far too much work.⁷ Clearly the existing system was destroying the well-being of the C in C - and he was not the only one suffering. Clayton found himself becoming a sort of shuttlecock between the demands of GHQ and those of the High Commissioner, who also tended to be involved in the affairs of foreign nationals.⁸ He also objected to the nature of his

⁵ McMahon to Grey 22 Sep. 1916. McMahon to F.O. 24 Sep. 1916. McMahon to Grey 29 Sep. 1916, FO 800/48.

⁶ W.D. Intelligence Section 1 Oct. 1916, W.O. 157/708.

⁷ Herbert to Wingate 28 Sep. 1916, Wingate papers 140/8/73. W. Marshall, Memories of Four Fronts (London, 1929), p. 180.

⁸ Wingate to Clayton 13 Sep. 1916, Clayton papers 470/3/61.

job, which forced him either to contact Murray and McMahon by phone or visit them by train, which was more satisfactory but far more demanding in terms of time expended. To Clayton the whole affair seemed absurd when 'the real centre of everything' was Cairo (where he was based) - and yet the C in C resided at Ismailia while the High Commissioner, much to Clayton's disgust, spent the summer at Alexandria on holiday: 'I really think that the seaside might be sacrificed in war time' was his opinion of this behaviour.⁹ Clayton, therefore, overwhelmed by work and in an impossible position was desperate for an immediate transfer of GHQ to Cairo and so was Reginald Wingate, the Sirdar of the Sudan, to whom Clayton poured out his heart in very long unofficial letters. Wingate - who was destined to be the next High Commissioner - felt that if Murray had positioned his GHQ at Cairo right from the start (ie. once Maxwell had departed) then 'a good deal of trouble and friction would have been avoided'.¹⁰ Both Wingate and Clayton hoped to increase their influence at GHQ, if it moved to Cairo, moreover.¹¹

Another factor involved in the transfer of GHQ may have been the personality of Murray's chief staff officer, Lynden-Bell. The EEF's CGS was a somewhat eccentric man who, by the very nature of his personal taste, did not find Ismailia, which lacked many of the common luxuries of life, to his liking. 'The CGS appears to be the most extraordinary particular fellow about his food and drink I have ever struck... [he] wants careful catering for. Flies are the CGS's pet aversion, and one or two buzzing about him nearly send him crazy.'¹² Lynden-Bell also seems to have liked to keep up on all the gossip of the military establishments in Egypt and London - and this very fact caused even Sir Archibald some anxiety.¹³ None of this is intended to suggest that

⁹ Clayton to Wingate 3 Aug. 1916, Clayton papers (St. Antony's College).

¹⁰ Wingate to Parker 19 July 1916, Clayton papers 470/3/9.

¹¹ Wingate to Clayton 1 Oct. 1916, Clayton papers 470/4/3.

¹² McGrigor diary 11 June 1916.

¹³ Robertson to Murray 20 June 1916, Robertson papers I/32/36. Apparently Lynden-Bell had told Murray that he had heard Murray might be replaced.

Lynden-Bell was not an efficient CGS, for he most certainly was; but it is intended to demonstrate that Ismailia did not appeal to him and that he was quite capable of manipulating both the C in C and others into seeing things from his perspective. Nor was General Murray invulnerable to this sort of manipulation, since whenever he travelled by train from Ismailia to Cairo or the western frontier he did so in conditions of comparative luxury that overawed those who accompanied him.¹⁴ Moreover, while at Ismailia there had been a conference over the allocation of electric fans, since the number was strictly limited (due to the lack of sufficient electricity) to no more than twelve; this caused some dispute as to which departments and officers would get at least one!¹⁵ This lack of amenities at Ismailia made the transfer of GHQ to Cairo very attractive to Lynden-Bell and his staff, for, after all, how could efficient staff work be done under such difficult circumstances - or so they must have argued.

The Official History refrains from making a judgement as to whether or not the transfer of the EEF's GHQ was justified although it does make the point that, with the headquarters at Cairo, Murray was no longer in touch with his troops.¹⁶ The decision to move GHQ has almost entirely been seen by subsequent commentators in the light of this criticism and the dramatic change that seemed to come over the EEF when Allenby moved GHQ back to the eastern front in 1917 - and yet, as we have already seen, there were strong legitimate reasons for the transfer. Even this criticism is not entirely fair and could be described as somewhat simplistic.

Sir Archibald remained most sensitive towards criticism of this decision, and the debate over its justification continued well after the First World War had come to an end - and even into the next World War!

¹⁴ McGrigor diary 14 July 1916. Fergusson to D'Ewes 27 Oct. 1916, Fergusson papers DEF/4.

¹⁵ McGrigor diary 18 June 1916.

¹⁶ Official History, p. 244.

In 1942 a letter appeared in 'The Times' commenting upon the actions of General Auchinleck who had found it necessary to take personal command of his troops in the Western Desert and so leave his GHQ at Cairo; but the real sting in this letter came next - this proved, it claimed, that Murray's decision to base his GHQ at Cairo had clearly been wrong, for Auchinleck had discovered this under the pressure of active military command. Murray, still alive and very much aware of events, felt sufficiently angered by this letter to reply in defence of his 1916 decision. His defence rested upon the fact that he had to cope with far more than merely events on the eastern front and, he suspected, Auchinleck would return to Cairo once his immediate crisis was over; this would add a further degree of similarity to the actions of the two generals, since Sir Archibald only moved his staff to Cairo once he had cleared up the immediate crisis on his eastern front. ¹⁷

Murray's 1942 defence remains valid today. He still had a very complex command - far more complex than just the eastern front - and the move of GHQ to Cairo actually initiated a far more wide-reaching reorganisation of the EEF. There were now four sections to the army: the Eastern Force for operations in the Sinai, the Western Force for actions against the Senussi, Delta District and Alexandria District for Egypt's internal security. These changes were made 'sufficiently elastic' to allow for some flexibility and so make possible any drastic alterations in times of crisis. ¹⁸ As far as the eastern front was concerned one might well argue that the transfer of GHQ actually cleared up a nebulous situation in the Sinai and greatly improved a most deficient command-structure that had proved its failings at Romani. General Lawrence had been given a temporary and under-manned HQ to command No 3 Section Canal Defences for the Romani campaign. But for continued operations in the Sinai it was clear such an ad hoc

¹⁷ Murray to Mr Savage 10 July 1942, Murray papers 79/48/4. Savage was a biographer of Allenby.

¹⁸ Director of Works, EEF to Maj.-Gen. Scott-Moncrieff 8 Nov. 1916, W.O. 161/39.

arrangement could not last. A full staff was needed and a permanent reorganisation of the force required so that it could more effectively operate as an offensive unit beyond Romani. A change in personnel was necessary also. Lawrence's chief staff officer had been proven to be unsatisfactory and was replaced, while Lawrence himself, having lost two sons in France and the confidence of his C in C in Egypt, returned home to an illustrious career with the BEF in the future.¹⁹ Murray therefore appointed Major-General Sir Charles Dobell to command what now became known as Eastern Force.²⁰ Dobell's reputation was good; he had been successful in the Cameroons and as commander of Egypt's Western Frontier Force. His arrival and the creation of this new force was greeted with great enthusiasm by the men of the EEF, not least by as capable a member as Dawnay, who was impressed by Dobell and whose not inconsiderable skills as a staff officer were to be available to Eastern Force from now on as its CGS. Indeed, in October of 1916 Dobell seemed the ideal man to achieve that rapport with the men that began to disappear as Murray had been distracted more and more by the internal affairs of Egypt. Dawnay described the new commander in the following glowing terms: 'He is a really fine fellow... hard as nails and of consuming energy... Very able, and very quick, a soldier to the core; absolutely selfless - regardless of anything except "the good of the show".'²¹ It would appear, therefore, that Murray had, in fact, organised his forces in such a way as to maintain a strongly offensive spirit in the Sinai with a far better command-structure, while making possible the closer administration of Egypt and enabling his own GHQ to cope more effectively with the many and varied demands made upon it at the time. He had learnt the lesson of Romani and had acted upon it; he correctly discerned that he must either delegate still further in the

¹⁹ Murray to Robertson 22 Sep. 1916, B.M. Add. MS 52462.

²⁰ The correct title was 'Eastern Frontier Force' but it was soon generally shortened to 'Eastern Force'.

²¹ Dawnay diary 17 Oct. 1916. Dawnay was an excellent choice for the Eastern Force's CGS since he had been doing the staff work and planning for the Sinai operations at GHQ since January 1916.

Sinai and make this delegation feasible by improving the staff available to such a command, or he ought to take personal command himself - he chose the former and gave Dobell an almost independent command. ²²

Having GHQ at Cairo certainly proved a great benefit in a number of ways. Clayton admitted that it seemed as if he now would have 'a good deal taken off my hands' and so be able to devote more time to his other work. ²³ Egypt certainly benefitted; an 'intimate relationship' grew up between the EEF and the Egyptian Government, while the close contact of military and civilian affairs reduced the friction caused by the demands made upon the country in order to facilitate the war effort, a factor which became a serious problem when Allenby moved GHQ out of Egypt and failed to communicate sufficiently with its authorities in 1917 and 1918. ²⁴ From October 1916, therefore, troubled waters were stilled in Egypt and inter-departmental friction was reduced, although not eradicated. In fact, the men at the Foreign Office were most unhappy about the course of events in Egypt. They were convinced that Murray had moved his GHQ to maintain his own personal control over martial law in Egypt which he believed ought to be a solely military matter. ²⁵ This was, naturally, a matter of some concern to the Foreign Office since it could mean that the High Commissioner of Egypt might be unable to exercise some of his responsibilities if Murray became too energetic in the defence of his rights. ²⁶ Yet this was a still more complex and pressing problem for another reason - a new High Commissioner was soon to be appointed. Sir Reginald Wingate, the Sirdar of the Sudan, would

²² The Australian Official History (p. 196) tries to argue somewhat unconvincingly that Murray failed to learn from his experience at Romani, since his delegation to Lawrence had allowed the Turks to escape; but this misses a crucial point - Lawrence might have succeeded if he had been more energetic and had had overall command. Murray believed Dobell was the former and he made sure he had the latter!

²³ Clayton to Wingate 9 Oct. 1916, Wingate papers 141/3/34.

²⁴ Elgood, pp. 312-320.

²⁵ Memorandum by Ronald Graham 13 Oct. 1916, FO 371/2672/255232.

²⁶ Minute by Ronald Graham 28 Nov. 1916, FO 371/2930/4445.

replace Sir Henry McMahon and potentially could cause a storm in Egypt for two reasons: he wanted to take over as the nominal C in C in the country and administer martial law himself.²⁷ These demands were not as outlandish as they sounded, for Wingate was in fact a more senior general than Murray and was still on the Army List. GHQ was, of course, not unaware of Wingate's rank and its possible ramifications and all of its members were eager for the slightest hint as to the new High Commissioner's intentions: 'No one at GHQ cares in the least what is happening on the Eastern or Western front, as their whole interest centres on the question whether or not the Sirdar will come here in uniform'.²⁸ Such developments filled the men at the Foreign Office with horror and they deprecated any attempt by Wingate to pull rank in Egypt since they feared it might lead to Murray's resignation.²⁹ They preferred a more subtle approach; the question of martial law should be raised privately, at first, and then, when Sir Archibald had 'his hands full' with active operations at El Arish, a transfer of power might be made to the new High Commissioner.³⁰ That there was no breakdown in relations between the EEF and Wingate was due ultimately to the strong friendship that developed between the two men, and not to the under-hand machinations of London's career diplomats. These developments demonstrate an inherent weakness in moving GHQ to Cairo, for it placed the C in C at the very centre of Egyptian political affairs and drew Murray into them to an extent he had never anticipated.

²⁷ Wingate to Grey 23 Nov. 1916, FO 371/2672/255232.

²⁸ Memorandum by Ronald Graham, *op.cit.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Minute by G. R. C. 6 Nov. 1916, FO 371/2672/222836.

CROSSING THE SINAI

Although Murray and his staff moved to Cairo this in no way prevented the C in C from giving the most precise attention to the support of his troops in the Sinai throughout the rest of 1916. This remained his chief priority. Indeed it would be quite wrong to outline the course of British operations in the Sinai without pausing to make some mention of the immense achievement involved in moving a modern European army across such hostile terrain. Because General Allenby was to win dramatic victories in 1917 and 1918 the crossing of the Sinai has been overshadowed; and, after all, the laying of a railway and pipe-line hardly stirs the soul like a daring cavalry charge or a victorious infantry assault! And yet the traversing of the Sinai was not without a certain 'romance'. ³¹ Nor should the importance of this achievement be overlooked; for, as one observer later wrote, the history of the Palestine campaign 'is incomplete without the story of the dark and struggling days in the Desert of Sinai'. ³² Murray's advance across the Sinai has even been viewed in biblical terms: 'I have a personal knowledge of your great work in the Desert of Sinai, and have always contended that in the matter of overthrowing the Turkish Empire... you must be considered for your stupendous preparatory work... You were the Moses who led the EEF to the borders of the Promised Land'. ³³ In order to grasp fully the true extent of Sir Archibald's achievement - and, indeed, that of the EEF and its men - we need to make ourselves conversant with the particular difficulties created by an advance across the Sinai and the measures adopted by Murray and his staff to overcome them and to transform what otherwise could merely have been a period of frustration into a time of great creativity and imaginative improvisation.

³¹ Maxse to Murray 6 Apr. 1933, Murray papers 79/48/3. Maxse calls the crossing of the Sinai 'a romance and an achievement'.

³² Col. E. A. Watkins to Murray 25 Jan. 1929, Murray papers 79/48/4.

³³ Ibid.

Perhaps Murray's greatest concern while his men crossed the Sinai was his fear of 'a catastrophe^[such] as the world would never forgive' caused by a failure of the EEF's water supply, which would leave British troops to fend for themselves under extremely trying circumstances.³⁴ If one remembers what happened to the British infantry during the action at Romani these were no idle fears - especially since both the Gallipoli and Mesopotamia campaigns led to inquiries into failures, so that Murray quite legitimately feared a similar public execution at the hands of the press and the politicians. He certainly felt the pressure daily, as he admitted: 'To cross the Sinai Peninsula with, say, 100,000 men and maintain them there with an adequate supply of water is an anxiety which no one who has not undertaken it can ever realise'.³⁵ To the British soldier the Sinai was rather like an alien landscape, quite unlike anything he had experienced previously and not easy to become accustomed to. Perhaps worst of all was the sheer physical effort needed to move over areas of loose sand; in fact, it was estimated that in terms of energy expended 10 miles in the Sinai was equivalent to 25 miles anywhere else - and this did not take account of the other problems such as lack of water, food and shade, and, of course, the heat.³⁶ Murray was obviously concerned that Robertson in London did not fully grasp the difficulties created by loose sand so, in order to correct this, he actually enclosed a photograph of the Qatia region in a private letter to the CIGS and explained that it was most difficult to dig or construct anything in such conditions: 'it is like digging water, and one sand storm and you can't find your work'.³⁷ Loose sand disturbed by a storm could become a serious matter and it was not unknown for trains to be derailed by such weather conditions as they crossed the Sinai.³⁸ But it was the heat that did the real damage to the EEF; it cut into the ranks of the British troops already exhausted by having to move over

³⁴ Murray to Col. E. A. Watkins 10 Oct. 1928, Murray papers 79/48/4.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Dawnay diary 5 Aug. 1916.

³⁷ Murray to Robertson 14 June 1916, BM Add. MS 52461.

³⁸ Dawnay diary 24 Jan. 1917.

deep sand; temperatures could reach 123° Fahrenheit inside a tent and even the equipment began to fail in such heat; for example, a new type of shell experimented with by the EEF was found to melt under conditions of extreme heat. ³⁹ These difficulties were accentuated by Murray's lack of troops experienced in desert warfare - a fact which Wingate commented upon as late as July 1916. ⁴⁰

Murray certainly felt that what had been achieved in the Sinai was unique. He compared the campaign with Kitchener's expedition across the Sudan only to demonstrate that the EEF's position was far different in that there had been no long period of preparation before the move into the Sinai and the troops had to make do with what could be constructed as they advanced. ⁴¹ With some irony Sir Archibald made the comment that when the history of his operations in the Sinai was written the CIGS would be surprised at what had been accomplished because all of Kitchener's efforts in the Sudan were only 'a fleabite' compared to the efforts of the EEF. ⁴² Not only did the C in C consider his army's achievements in the Sinai unique, but he found the whole affair of getting a European force, used to certain everyday comforts, across the Sinai a most intellectually stimulating - if not exciting - affair: 'If my operations were not quite of a secondary nature they would interest the world immensely. The conquest of the Sinai by rail and pipe-line is rather fascinating'. ⁴³ This sort of interest led Murray to examine the different historical accounts of previous crossings of the Sinai and to decide on his route accordingly. ⁴⁴ Because the C in C remained enthusiastic about his task he never allowed matters to stagnate while the EEF was in the Sinai so that after the war his efforts could be quite fairly described as an 'energetic offensive'. ⁴⁵

³⁹ Lynden-Bell to War Office 24 Aug. 1916, W.O. 95/4365.

⁴⁰ Wingate to Clayton July 1916, Clayton papers 470/3/11.

⁴¹ Murray Despatches. Second Despatch 1 Oct. 1916, p. 51.

⁴² Murray to Robertson 2 Aug. 1916, Robertson papers I/32/42.

⁴³ Murray to Robertson 2 Nov. 1916, BM Add. MS 52462.

⁴⁴ Lecture by Murray at Aldershot, op. cit.

⁴⁵ M.G.E. Bowman-Manifold, An Outline of the Egyptian and Palestine Campaigns 1914-1918 (London, 1920), p. 34.

Supplying the EEF with water whilst advancing in the Sinai certainly offered Sir Archibald a 'fascinating' problem that fully occupied his undoubted intellectual abilities. Once Romani was secured a reservoir was constructed there - and nearly all the water drunk by the troops was drawn by tank trucks from this reservoir to storage tanks at the railhead to the east. When the pipe-line was laid to Bir el Abd another reservoir was completed there and the whole process repeated. The pipe-line did not reach El Arish until 5 February 1917, by which time it had nearly caught up with the railway and had made possible the crossing of the wilderness by British troops - but such a description gives a most false impression that the entire enterprise was fairly straightforward; it certainly was not. ⁴⁶ Personnel could be a real headache. Because the Royal Engineers were so busy they had to make use of Egyptian labourers who had no idea how to screw the pipes together, so that 'it looked as if the work would never have been completed'; even though the labourers gradually became more proficient at this job they created a further problem by their very existence because they had to be fed and the EEF already used all the existing transport facilities. ⁴⁷ Equipment did not always meet the requirements made upon it any more than did the personnel; the pump machinery intended to move the water of the Sweet Water Canal through filters and up to the port was 'not always equal to the task allotted to it', for example. ⁴⁸ Nor was haste always the best policy, for the first pipe-line laid beyond Romani was constructed so rapidly that when it filled with water serious leaks were soon observed and water was wasted: 'The inference is that too much was attempted', concluded an official report on the matter. ⁴⁹ Because of these problems the C in C asked London for a technical expert to advise on the best and most economical methods of laying a water

⁴⁶ Official History, pp. 271-272.

⁴⁷ Report on Water Supply to the Egyptian Field Force 1914-July 1917, Murray papers 79/48/2.

⁴⁸ 'Report of the Engineer Works in Egypt', Murray papers 79/48/2.

⁴⁹ 'Report of an Inspection of Water Supply Arrangements in No 3 Section, Canal Defences' by Maj.-Gen. Wright and Col. Sir Murdoch MacDonald 20 Nov. 1916, W.O. 95/4366.

pipe-line across the Sinai. Meanwhile, the War Office sought to do all it could to help and sent an agent to America to purchase the necessary equipment needed while Britain was scoured for pump machinery, and ships from the United States carrying the all-important pipes were specially escorted through the Mediterranean by the Royal Navy. ⁵⁰ Nonetheless, water never ceased to be a cause of concern to Murray and it was an important influence upon his strategy; indeed, there were times when he even considered reducing the number of troops on the eastern front simply because the amount of water required to keep them fully active took up so many trains on the railway that it was hindering the entire advance. ⁵¹

The key to the material advance of the EEF was undoubtedly the Sinai railway which, ultimately, would reach Deir el Belan in Palestine in April 1917, the continued construction ^{of which} ~~was~~ delayed by the liquid demands of the troops. ⁵² London had a sort of fixation about the railway and seemed to desire to be involved in every aspect of its progress, so that when Murray explained that Egypt could not supply him with the rails he needed the War Office and the Foreign Office decided to lend a hand and make it quite clear to the civilian authorities in Egypt that the EEF's requirements were an absolute priority. ⁵³ This entire affair became linked in the minds of the politicians in Britain with what they believed to be a lack of war atmosphere in Egypt; this lax ~~ad~~adazical attitude was, they assumed, delaying Murray's advance. ⁵⁴ While there was some truth in this accusation the difficulties facing the C in C were far more complex than this. The progress of the railway could, for instance, be determined by the nature of the terrain over which it was being laid, so that beyond El Arish the railway failed by

⁵⁰ 'Report on Water Supply', op. cit.

⁵¹ Murray to Robertson 22 Sep. 1916, BM Add. MS 52462.

⁵² Report of Engineer in Chief after visit to No 3 Section 20 Aug. 1916, W.O. 95/4365.

⁵³ Gen. MacDonagh to Under Secretary of State, Foreign Affairs, 22 July 1916 and Minute by GRC 25 July 1916, FO 371/2672/143563.

⁵⁴ War Committee meeting 6 July 1916, CAB 42/16/1.

about a month to meet its deadline due to difficulties caused by sand dunes. ⁵⁵ Another factor influencing the progress of the railway was the activity of enemy aircraft; the Egyptian labourers employed to lay the rails refused to work by day while Turkish planes bombed the line, and they did little by night at such times with ^{the} inevitable result that progress was 'extremely slow'. ⁵⁶ The only way the construction workers could be induced to continue working at all was by maintaining continuous air cover over the railway, an operation that caused a heavy drain upon Murray's scanty aerial resources. ⁵⁷ Moreover, even when the necessary rails for continued construction could be obtained (since Britain had none available) - from India - they were not of sufficient quality to satisfy Sir Archibald; and he always remained short of certain vital pieces of equipment. ⁵⁸ In spite of these numerous frustrations the C in C saw remarkable progress on the railway under his leadership: 'extraordinary it seems', was one observer's comment on the subject. ⁵⁹

The difficulties posed by the Sinai were a stimulation to the intellectual activity of the EEF's staff and much attention was given to how movement over loose sand could be facilitated. The use of rabbit wire as a firm foundation upon which infantry boots could grip made life easier - but miracles were needed if all the hindrances of desert conditions were to be overcome, as Guy Dawnay ruefully admitted: 'All we want now is (a) water in a tabloid form! and (b) some good means of enabling wheels to get over sand'. ⁶⁰ The continuous frustration of the troops' lack of mobility in the Sinai led GHQ to experiment in other ways. A deliberate decision was made to increase the number of camels

⁵⁵ Lynden-Bell to Chetwode 29 Jan. 1917, Chetwode papers PWCI/Folder1.

⁵⁶ Chetwode to HQ East Force 16 Jan. 1917, W.O. 95/4471.

⁵⁷ Murray to Wingate 25 Jan. 1917, W.O. 158/627.

⁵⁸ Secretary of State for War, War Office to C in C India 5 Feb. 1917. C in C India to War Office 8 Feb. 1917. War Office to C in C India 16 Feb. 1917. Diary note 28 Feb. 1917, L/MIL/17/5/3915.

⁵⁹ McGrigor diary 10 Oct. 1916.

⁶⁰ Dawnay diary 19 Dec. 1916.

used by the EEF for transport; and steps were then taken to form a Camel Corps of fighting troops mounted upon camels so that a more heavily-armed force would, in future, be available to augment the firepower of the existing lightly-equipped mounted troops. Ultimately these experiments would lead to the formation of the Imperial Camel Corps that would serve with distinction in the Palestine campaign. ⁶¹ At the same time Murray instituted a course of training at Zeitoun in Egypt to provide 'special instruction' for cavalry units so that they would be better able to meet the demands made upon them during active operations in the Sinai. ⁶²

But the most remarkable and imaginative developments encouraged by Sir Archibald during the EEF's period in the Sinai came in a most unexpected area - aerial photography and mapping. In actual fact this was nothing new for Egypt, since Maxwell had made a number of experiments in this sphere in 1915. In part this had been caused by his having to rely more heavily than was usual upon aerial reconnaissance over the Sinai due to the Turkish strategy of making a series of small advances towards the Canal. However, Sir John had certainly been impressed by what his planes could do, for in August 1915 he recommended a similar policy to General Hamilton, who was then struggling to hold his positions on the Gallipoli Peninsula. Maxwell sent Hamilton the results of 'some experiments' by his planes over the Sinai and then included some startling advice to the embattled Chief of the MEF: 'It appears to me that in a very short time with adequate encouragement you can have the whole of the Gallipoli Peninsula absolutely accurately mapped showing every trench and gun position'. ⁶³

The first steps taken in this direction were not forgotten when the MEF took over operations in the Sinai from the Force in Egypt in January

⁶¹ GHQ to Maj.-Gen. Chauvel 22 Aug. 1916, W.O. 95/4365.

⁶² Note by Capt. Williams 24 Sep. 1916, W.O. 95/4365.

⁶³ Maxwell to Hamilton 18 Aug. 1915, Hamilton papers 5/12

of 1916. They soon discovered that aerial photographs provided 'excellent details' of the enemy's permanent works in the Sinai. ⁶⁴ Moreover, these same photographs proved an excellent check upon the reports of some of the Arab agents used by the British whose estimates as to the size of a Turkish force frequently betrayed 'a tendency to megalomania'! Consequently great care was taken to ensure that accurate maps of important positions were drawn by outlining instructions for the pilots and observers involved so that the photographs were taken vertically from a uniform height; it was also important that the photographs overlapped to prevent any area being missed. ⁶⁵ Meanwhile, serious topographical work in the Sinai had already begun; the first squadrons of Yeomanry despatched into the Sinai were sent not only as a 'step forward' towards the ultimate occupation of Qatia, but also to cover survey teams mapping the terrain. ⁶⁶ As the months passed this policy was continued and with such energy and enthusiasm that survey teams followed the retreating Turks after the battle at Romani. ⁶⁷ A Topographical Section of the Intelligence Branch co-ordinated all of this work so that the survey teams on the ground and the aerial photographers complemented each other with the result that standardised tactical maps of the Sinai were printed and distributed to the EEF. Murray himself was under no illusions as to the value of this work as he explained in his official despatch 1 June 1916: 'I believe that the map based on this survey is the first map entirely constructed on this principle'. ⁶⁸ These mapping expeditions were continued until the final months of Sir Archibald's time in Egypt: in May 1917 a Topographical Survey Section was despatched to Northern Sinai to sketch the area which had not been fully mapped previously because of the dash to El Arish and Gaza. ⁶⁹ The methods developed in these surveys by land and air

⁶⁴ Egypt Command Intelligence Summary 26 Jan. - 2 Feb. 1916, W.O. 157/700.

⁶⁵ Intelligence Summary 16 Apr. 1916, W.O. 157/703.

⁶⁶ 15 Army Corps to GHQ 20 Feb. 1916, W.O. 95/4361.

⁶⁷ W.D. Intelligence Section 31 Aug. 1916, W.O. 157/707.

⁶⁸ Murray Despatches. First despatch 1 June 1916, p. 9.

⁶⁹ Southern Canal Section Order No 23 by Brig.-Gen. P.C. Palin, W.O. 95/4450.

proved of value operationally to the EEF; for example, aerial photography of the Turkish defences near Rafah greatly assisted the raid upon that position in January 1917.⁷⁰ The techniques learnt in the Sinai were used to map the whole of Palestine, so that by the end of the war the British had an orderly map of the country on a scale of 1:40,000; this was a significant step in the history of modern topographical methods and Murray must take full credit for encouraging and facilitating its progress in its early days.⁷¹

THE ADVANCE TOWARDS EL ARISH

In the immediate period after the Battle of Romani the first task for the EEF was to rest its exhausted troops. However, as the weeks passed a more energetic strategy was adopted and the Australian and New Zealand mounted troops started to make regular reconnaissances into the Sinai. This strategy led to two very similar raids being mounted by the British - raids which would influence the EEF's policy in the desert in the future and that demonstrated the weaknesses of such schemes however carefully they were planned.

On 17 September 1916 a mixed force of Light Horse, Imperial Camel Corps and artillery attacked the Turkish outpost at El Mazar on the main coastal track to El Arish, which the enemy had occupied after the retreat from Romani. Major-General Chauvel, in command of the operation, had been given strict orders to break off the engagement if the enemy were encountered in greater strength than was expected because, explained the C in C, 'it is useless to throw away valuable lives in attempting to capture strongly held entrenchments with mounted troops' when one could wait a few weeks to be sure of taking the

⁷⁰ Hill, p. 90.

⁷¹ D.Gavich, 'An account of an unrealised aerial cadastral survey in Palestine under the British Mandate', Geographical Journal, CLIII (1987), pp. 93-98.

position with infantry once the general advance of the EEF reached the area. ⁷² The intention of surprising the enemy was lost because the force was spotted by Turkish aircraft; nonetheless, an assault was attempted, but was soon called off on account of the strength of the enemy force and the late arrival of the artillery. ⁷³ Although Murray wrote of the action in glowing terms to Robertson little had been achieved in purely military terms - though the C in C's instructions were vindicated as the Turks evacuated El Mazar shortly afterwards. ⁷⁴ On the other hand, some important tactical lessons had been learnt; not the least of these was the discovery that camel forces could not move anywhere near as fast as the cavalry, which had been proved by the late arrival of the Camel Corps at El Mazar. ⁷⁵ The EEF was still cutting its teeth in terms of operations under desert conditions, therefore, even as late as September 1916 which, in itself, helps to demonstrate Murray's very real achievements during 1916 in occupying the Sinai Peninsula. But his army was learning all the time - and lessons about the limitations of surprise raids that would bear fruit in later successes. For example, El Mazar proved the difficulty of achieving surprise and, still more important, the problems involved in co-ordinating an attack against entrenched positions at the appointed time after a long march.

The second operation was against Bir el Maghara, 50 miles to the south east of Romani. Once again the instructions were clear: the primary object was the destruction of the enemy's guns and equipment, but 'if the... positions be stronger than anticipated the attack will be turned into a reconnaissance in force'. ⁷⁶ The attacking force was commanded by Major-General Dallas and consisted of Light Horse,

⁷² GHQ to GOC No 3 Section 9 Sep. 1916, W.O. 95/4365.

⁷³ Official History, p. 245. Hill, pp. 197-199.

⁷⁴ Murray to Robertson 22 Sep. 1916, BM Add.MS 52462.

⁷⁵ General Staff note on the Operations at El Mazar 16-17 Sep. 1916, W.O. 95/4366.

⁷⁶ 6 Oct. 1916, W.O. 95/4366.

Yeomanry, Camel Corps and horse artillery.⁷⁷ The entire action followed a similar pattern to that of the operation at El Mazar - night marches and then an attack that was not pressed home due to the strength of the enemy's position. This engagement took place on 13 October 1916: it emphasised the lessons learnt at El Mazar and provided the EEF with further valuable experience in desert warfare.

It was for operations such as these, but on a larger scale, that Murray now sought a 'special type' of commander to lead one or two divisions and several mounted brigades; these were, in reality, the old No 3 Section Canal Defences, and General Dallas had been given temporary command of them until a more suitable officer was found. The C in C had explained to the CIGS exactly the sort of man he wanted and he stressed that it would be a 'most important' appointment and that he did not want someone who had been over-looked in France, but a young, active, modern soldier not obsessed with trench warfare.⁷⁸ Robertson was feeling generous and Murray got the very man he was after, Major-General Sir Philip Chetwode. Chetwode was given the temporary rank of Lieutenant-General with command of the 'Desert Column' (the new name for No 3 Section), which was to spear-head Eastern Force's advance across the Sinai. He took over his new command on 7 December 1916 as a Corps Commander, but subordinate to Dobell.⁷⁹ From now on Chetwode would be responsible for raids like El Mazar and Bir el Maghara while Dobell watched from over his shoulder. As if to emphasise this the new commander soon advanced his own headquarters to Mazar.

Although there had been a brief halt in the Sinai advance after Romani Murray was determined that his offensive would continue

⁷⁷ Official History, pp. 245-6. Australian Official History, pp. 200-203. The Australian work does not seem to have been aware of the fact that Dallas was acting according to his orders when he broke off the attack.

⁷⁸ GOC in C Egypt to CIGS 21 Oct. 1916, W.O. 33/905.

⁷⁹ W.D. Eastern Force 7 Dec. 1916, W.O. 95/4449.

undisrupted by the enemy. It is unfortunate that the EEF's progress after Romani has been described as being made 'steadily and methodically'.^{e0} In one sense such a description is absolutely correct, for Sir Archibald had to push his men forward from one position to another according to the progress of the railway and pipeline. But, on the other hand, the very wording of this description is unfortunate for it gives the impression that the EEF crawled across the Sinai in a cautious manner. This is quite incorrect: Murray consistently pushed his men forward in order to reach El Arish as quickly as possible.

Only days after the Romani engagement had ended the C in C summoned his generals to GHQ in order to discuss the Bir al Abd area, the next position in the drive to El Arish, which Sir Archibald wanted permanently occupied.^{e1} GHQ soon requested detailed proposals from No 3 Section for the permanent occupation of all the water-bearing areas up to and including Bir el Abd and beyond Romani. Murray also made it clear that the 'utmost economy' was to be practised in the number of troops garrisoning these positions so that most remained available for offensive actions; the garrisons themselves were to act as pivot centres from which mobile troops could act offensively.^{e2}

These decisions reflected the C in C's rock-like determination to reach El Arish by the winter; when he found himself under pressure to release troops to the Hejaz in September for the support of the Sherif's beleaguered forces there, he became almost ruthless in his rejection of such a course of action: 'I have the task on my hands now of advancing to El Arish. I am one-third of the way there and I am determined to get to El Arish... Nothing will induce me to reduce the strength of troops

^{e0} Official History, p. 201.

^{e1} Murray diary 13 Aug. 1916. C in C to GOC No 3 Section 14 Aug. 1916, Murray papers 79/48/3.

^{e2} GHQ to GOC No 3 Section 5 Sep. 1916, W.O. 95/4365.

to carry on that plan'. ⁸³ The added pressure of the Arab revolt and the demands that it began to make on the EEF (both in terms of equipment and potential operations) seemed to strengthen Murray in his resolve to reach El Arish come what may - and he even began to adopt a more forthright tone in his communications with the CIGS as a result. ⁸⁴

Murray's rigid determination to continue his planned move on El Arish may also have been accentuated, somewhat ironically, by the EEF's weakened condition after Romani. The necessary drafts needed to restore his infantry to full strength were slow in coming, and he also began to lose men to Salonica in November. ⁸⁵ This drain upon his already meagre resources went 'sorely against the grain', Murray admitted. ⁸⁶ As a result of these losses the C in C explained to London that although he had always estimated his needs for the capture of El Arish at five divisions and four mounted brigades, he now had only four under-strength divisions, although he did have six mounted brigades. ⁸⁷ Sir Archibald would have been horrified, however, had he known what was on Robertson's mind towards the end of September, for the CIGS told Henry Wilson privately that he hoped to get two more divisions for France from Egypt by the spring! ⁸⁸ Angered by these developments, the C in C was stung into pressing forward still more rapidly to achieve the goal for which he had been aiming since February - the occupation of El Arish.

Murray's enthusiasm for this objective was not merely based upon his desire to secure Egypt in the east; he and his officers were more

⁸³ Conference held at C in C's residence, Ismailia, 12 Sep. 1916, W.O. 158/602.

⁸⁴ Murray to Robertson 15 Sep. 1916, W.O. 158/602.

⁸⁵ The EEF sent one mounted brigade and two infantry battalions to Salonica in November.

⁸⁶ Murray to CIGS 7 Sep. 1916, W.O. 106/715.

⁸⁷ Murray to CIGS 21 Oct. 1916, W.O. 106/715.

⁸⁸ Henry Wilson diary 21 Sep. 1916.

ambitious than this. For example, he informed Robertson in a private letter that from El Arish he would be able to 'seriously affect' enemy operations in Arabia and Syria and act as a useful auxiliary to the Russians in the Caucasus and the British forces in Mesopotamia. 89 The C in C was thinking in grand strategic terms as he contemplated the seizure of El Arish, therefore; but even this seems fairly tame compared to the ambitious schemes being drawn up by his subordinates in the autumn of 1916. Clayton, in Cairo, considered that an advance beyond El Arish to a line from Gaza to the east of Beersheba with its right flank protected by the impassable country west of the Dead Sea was without doubt the best way for the EEF to make its presence felt in the Middle East since it would secure Egypt more effectively than at the Canal or El Arish and menace all of Syria together with the enemy's communications with the Hejaz. 90

Aware that Murray was starting to develop some ambitious plans for the future, the CIGS decided to stop them before he lost control and was unable to withdraw from Egypt the men he believed were needed on the Western Front. He therefore re-emphasized what he considered were British objectives in the region: 'Broadly speaking, and in connection with the war as a whole... the policy in Egypt... necessarily remains a defensive one'. Murray was, of course, to take every effort to hurry along the advance to El Arish but, at the same time, he was also to increase the efficiency of his troops so that Egypt could be defended with the minimum number of men. 91

Whether Robertson expected it or not Sir Archibald responded to his re-emphasis of the EEF's objectives most pointedly. For on thing, as far as Murray was concerned the CIGS had, for the second time, vindicated his original memorandum of February advocating an 'active defence' based upon an occupation of El Arish. But then he added

89 Murray to Robertson 30 Sep. 1916, BM Add.MS 52462.

90 Clayton to Wingate 12 Oct. 1916, Wingate papers 141/3/50.

91 CIGS to Murray 4 Oct. 1916, W.O. 106/715.

something that proved he was still thinking offensively: if only the security of Egypt is sought, he wrote, then the current position at Bir el Abd is quite satisfactory, but 'I feel strongly that our role in this theatre demands something more... and that it is incumbent on us to do all in our power to assist in the general plan of operations'. ⁹² Once again the C in C explained that he hoped, at the very least, to prevent the withdrawal of enemy troops from Sinai and Syria and to threaten the Turkish line of communications to the Hejaz. Robertson's re-statement of aims and Murray's reply are both important for the evidence they provide as to the weaknesses in British strategy in this period. The CIGS had hinted in August and earlier in the year that he was optimistic about the EEF achieving real results in the winter of 1916 and 1917, as we have already seen; now, however, as the demands of France pressed upon him he found himself forced to stifle undue optimism in Egypt and to state clearly that El Arish would be the limit of the advance. But this was no solution to the problem because, as Murray stated, occupying El Arish meant adopting a policy that went beyond merely defending Egypt. So, although Sir Archibald interpreted the CIGS's official communication as being a re-statement of his February 1916 memorandum, he was being charitable; it was, in reality, the product of a man who under intense pressure was seeking to fulfil numerous conflicting demands and did not fully grasp the consequences of his own orders. The CIGS had begun to vacillate.

That the CIGS had started to give out more cautious signals about the EEF's role was quite obvious in London. In a general review of the war so far, written in October for the War Committee, for example, Robertson made no mention of the intention to reach El Arish by the winter when discussing operations in the Sinai, and only talked of 'a further advance' beyond the Qatia region once the railway had reached there. ⁹³ Lloyd George was not in the least impressed by this

⁹² Murray to CIGS 21 Oct. 1916, W.O. 106/715.

⁹³ 'A General Review of the Situation in all Theatres of War', by CIGS Oct. 1916, CAB 42/22/15.

and detected the undertones of 'nothing more just yet' for the EEF that seemed to pervade Robertson's attitude towards the Sinai at this stage. ⁹⁴ Nonetheless, Murray continued true to form to execute the policy that he had always advocated and that most certainly meant something more than simply securing Egypt from attack. In November he telegraphed the CIGS and declared his intentions once at El Arish: he would harass the Turks in Syria with his mobile forces based at the town and so hope to attract enemy forces to his front from the Caucasus, Mesopotamia or the Hejaz; he called this policy 'defensive - offensive' and added that if the EEF was reduced below its current strength he would be forced to adopt a purely defensive role which might lead to the force being ignored by the enemy, thus meaning that London would not get full value from his army. ⁹⁵

By November, as the prospect of the El Arish operation loomed larger, however, Robertson began to change his attitude somewhat. This was partly because various members of the War Committee had 'expressed satisfaction' that El Arish might finally be occupied and had urged the CIGS to make sure ^{the plan} was executed as soon as possible. But the main reason for the CIGS's 'volte face' was more subtle than this. He wished to prevent the despatch of any British troops to Rabegh on the coast of the Hejaz and he realised that he could most effectively do this by playing on the politicians' delight at the El Arish operation while simultaneously explaining that if they sanctioned the Rabegh landing El Arish would become impossible. He was therefore prepared now to talk of the El Arish plan as 'an offensive measure' making possible raids into Syria - all of which appealed to the men of the War Committee. He also emphasized the importance attached to the El Arish operations by the Russians. ⁹⁶ That Robertson succeeded in elevating the importance of the occupation of El Arish in the eyes of the members of the War Committee can be seen by the conclusions of the Committee's meeting of

⁹⁴ Lloyd George I, p. 538.

⁹⁵ Chief Egyptforce to Chief London 12 Nov. 1916, W.O. 158/627.

⁹⁶ 'The Occupation of El Arish' by CIGS 19 Nov. 1916, CAB 42/24/8.

20 November 1916: 'There was general agreement... that the abandonment of this carefully prepared expedition was highly undesirable'. ⁹⁷

Of course, internal politics in London and the personal ambitions of General Murray could all be of merely academic interest if the Ottoman Empire decided to disrupt proceedings in the Sinai. And there seemed to be some chance of this - at least, so it appeared in September and October. The Allies were not the only ones to draw a connection between the campaign in the Caucasus and that in the Sinai; it was not impossible, therefore, mused the General Staff in London, that Constantinople might decide to transfer some of the divisions in the Caucasus to the Sinai at the end of October, since from November until late March no operations were possible in the Caucasus due to the snow, and were such a policy followed eight fresh enemy divisions could start arriving on Murray's front in November. ⁹⁸ The C in C examined these alarming predictions in his long official memorandum to the CIGS of 21 October 1916, where he argued that at an 'outside estimate' it was possible the Turks could have 55,000 men in total to face him early in 1917 (including potential Caucasus reinforcements) - but he would surely be aware if any such concentration were taking place. ⁹⁹ The C in C's confidence was based upon the success of his intelligence services that had perfected the interception of the enemy's wireless messages and could read their ciphers even when they were altered. ¹⁰⁰ However, this did not mean that there were no problems; for example, early in December it was common knowledge at GHQ that two enemy divisions had been 'lost sight of' and were thought to be on the way to El Arish. ¹⁰¹ Moreover, the Germans were believed to be keen on another attack upon the Suez Canal and would push for one if the troops became available. ¹⁰² But

⁹⁷ War Committee meeting 20 Nov. 1916, CAB 42/24/13.

⁹⁸ Problematical reinforcement of the Sinai force from divisions in the Caucasus 13 Sep. 1916 by M.I.2, W.O. 106/1511.

⁹⁹ Murray to CIGS 21 Oct. 1916, W.O. 106/715.

¹⁰⁰ W.D. Intelligence Section 28 and 29 Sep. 1916, W.O. 157/708. 1916, W.O. 157/711. W.D. Intelligence
Section 19 Dec.

¹⁰¹ McGrigor diary 5 Dec. 1916.

¹⁰² W.D. Intelligence Section GHQ IEFD 15 Oct. 1916, W.O. 157/792.

German and Turkish views diverged; Berlin looked to Egypt as the goal of the future offensive operations by Constantinople while the Turkish saw the Hejaz as of far more importance; it was, after all, part of the Ottoman Empire and they were in danger of losing it. ¹⁰³ As it turned out, Berlin failed; there was no attack upon Egypt in the winter of 1916-1917 and no large transfer of troops from the Caucasus - but the threat remained at the back of the mind of the men at GHQ since there was still talk of an attack in the spring of 1917. ¹⁰⁴ This explains why Sir Archibald added a caveat to his plan of campaign towards El Arish of October: if his own strength was materially reduced or if the enemy were heavily reinforced then he would have to reconsider his options. ¹⁰⁵

Meanwhile, in Egypt and the Sinai specific preparations were being made for the occupation of El Arish as early as October. On 8 October the C in C asked Admiral Wemyss if the Royal Navy might not be able to help the EEF by supplying El Arish from the sea once the town had been taken; most significant of all was the C in C's reason for asking for this additional support: 'my future plans by no means end with the occupation of El Arish, and... these plans would be severely handicapped if no additional supply route by sea is possible'. ¹⁰⁶ It was estimated that the EEF would reach El Arish during December - but for a while at the end of October and early in November it seemed as if the town might fall to Murray far earlier than this. A number of unconfirmed reports were received that El Arish had been evacuated and, although the RFC remained unable to ascertain whether this information was correct during the last days of October, two companies were moved to Qantara 'with a view to a move on El Arish forthwith', while preparations were made to

¹⁰³ Report from Agent No. 92, Alexandria, 21 Nov. 1916, L/P+S/11/114/5095.

¹⁰⁴ Daily Situation Summary. Intelligence Section IEFD 9 Nov. 1916, W.O. 157/793. From the representative of our Alexandria organisation Basra, 28 Nov. 1916, L/P+S/11/114/5095.

¹⁰⁵ Murray to CIGS 21 Oct. 1916, W.O. 106/715.

¹⁰⁶ GHQ to Vice Admiral, East Indies 8 Oct. 1916, W.O. 95/4365.

supply and maintain by sea the troops who were to be despatched to the Sinai town. ¹⁰⁷ On 4 November Dobell submitted his plans for a rapid seizure of El Arish; his intention was to send one infantry brigade by sea with three weeks' supplies to capture the town by a coup, while simultaneously a cavalry regiment was to make its way by road with seven days' supplies; this joint force would hold El Arish until the main body reached the town, the Royal Navy supplying the defenders in the meantime. ¹⁰⁸ At GHQ Murray studied this plan, but rejected it as too risky since he feared the Turks might have withdrawn deliberately in order to entice the British into an advanced position at El Arish from which they could not retire. ¹⁰⁹ But the attempt had been seriously considered and preparations had even been made at Qantara, so that this affair demonstrates the offensive spirit of the EEF at this time, which was clearly benefitting from the energy and imagination of Dobell. Nor did this affair stop planning and preparations for the landing of supplies at El Arish once the general advance came within striking distance of the town. ¹¹⁰

SEIZING EL ARISH AND THE BATTLE OF MAGHDABA

By December it was Murray's intention to make 'as large a success as I can get at Arish', although he feared the Turks might evacuate their position and deny the EEF a potential victory. While Murray outlined the problems his units faced beyond El Arish he nevertheless made a promise to the CIGS - a promise which he had every intention of keeping: 'You may rely on me... to push on as rapidly as I possibly can'. ¹¹¹

¹⁰⁷ Summary of Principal Events in October 1916 and Note 26 Oct. 1916, W.O. 95/4366. W.D. Intelligence Section 27 and 31 Oct. 1916, W.O. 157/709.

¹⁰⁸ 4 Nov. 1916, W.O. 95/4366. The Official History fails to make any mention of this entire matter, which is surprising because one of its authors certainly saw this War Diary.

¹⁰⁹ GHQ to GOC East Force 4 Nov. 1916, W.O. 95/4366.

¹¹⁰ Lynden-Bell to GOC East Force 7 Nov. 1916, W.O. 95/4366.

¹¹¹ GOC in C Egypt to CIGS 10 Dec. 1916, W.O. 106/715.

This determination to push on with all haste was transmitted to Eastern Force HQ. It is not surprising to discover, therefore, that Dawnay drew up a memorandum for the Desert Column on operations beyond El Arish stressing these very points. Chetwode was told to 'strain every effort' to make his mounted troops mobile and so pursue retiring Turkish units or those positioned at Maghaba, Abu Aweiliga, Sheikh Zowaid and Rafah. The clear aim of such activity was to strike a blow at the enemy's morale and so give the Turks 'an exaggerated impression of our mobility and power to strike'. ¹¹² It was all a case of bluffing the enemy into believing that the EEF was better equipped and stronger than it actually was, a policy of some risk given the nature of the terrain in which such operations were to be conducted, the possibility of finding the enemy in strong, prepared positions, and the chance that the new War Cabinet might gain an inflated impression of what the EEF had actually achieved. In fact, Dobell complained to GHQ that the Desert Column might not be able to do anything at all beyond El Arish and would have to await supplies; to which GHQ's reply was plain: 'The C in C is most particularly anxious that no such pause should occur'. ¹¹³

It seemed that the best way to seize El Arish was an enveloping attack by the British cavalry, since an elaborate infantry assault would take too long and greatly increase the risk of an enemy evacuation before the town could be occupied. ¹¹⁴ Preparations were still not complete by 20 December; then came the news that El Arish had been evacuated. Chetwode immediately summoned General Chauvel by phone that morning and ordered the ANZAC Mounted Division to march on El Arish with

¹¹² Dawnay to GOC Desert Column 18 Dec. 1916, W.O. 95/4449.

¹¹³ Dobell to CGS, GHQ 18 Dec. 1916 and marginal comment, W.O. 95/4449.

¹¹⁴ Fergusson to GOC ANZAC Mounted Division 12 Dec. 1916, W.O. 95/4429. This contradicts the version in the Official History (p. 252) which states it was only decided to drop the infantry advance once it had been discovered the Turks had left El Arish.

the intention of surrounding it at dawn on 21 December. ¹¹⁵ The town was subsequently taken with little trouble and Chauvel's men learnt that the Turks had actually left there days earlier in the direction of Magdhaba. On the morning of 22 December Chetwode landed on the beach at El Arish and injected a degree of energy into preparations for a further dash forward: 'On arrival he pointed out that it was most important to go after the enemy at once... and that with this in view he had arranged for a special convoy with rations and horse feed to arrive at El Arish'. ¹¹⁶ GHQ was informed of these developments and given the good news that the mounted troops would be able to pursue the enemy on 23 December, news which brought delight to Murray. ¹¹⁷

Meanwhile, an RFC report informed the British that there was a strong enemy force at Magdhaba; Chetwode therefore decided to concentrate all his available strength in a raid there. Chauvel led his men out of El Arish at midnight and when dawn broke Magdhaba was in sight. For this engagement Chauvel had at his disposal the ANZAC Mounted Division and the Imperial Camel Brigade which was well equipped with artillery; in fact, the Desert Column troops enjoyed a three-fold artillery superiority in the ensuing battle and this almost certainly influenced the final outcome. ¹¹⁸ This superiority in firepower and its influence upon the battle was a most significant factor, for it allowed mounted troops to capture prepared positions without heavy losses; but the lesson seems to have been overlooked by the upper échelons of the EEF during 1917. ¹¹⁹

¹¹⁵ 'Operations 20 December - 24 December including the occupation of El Arish and the attack at Bir el Magdhaba' by Chauvel. This explains the discrepancy with the Official History: the original plan for a general advance on El Arish was discarded when news of the evacuation was received, but Desert Column already had a plan ready that admirably suited the new situation.

¹¹⁶ 'Operations 20 December - 24 December including the occupation of El Arish', op. cit.

¹¹⁷ Telephone message from General Staff, Eastern Force 22 Dec. 1917. Marginal note by Murray: 'Excellent work', W.O. 95/4449.

¹¹⁸ Official History, p. 258.

¹¹⁹ Eastern Force was significantly short of artillery when it tried to seize Gaza in March.

The Turkish position consisted of about six redoubts lying outside the Wadi el Arish. According to information Chauvel received there were no signs of any Turkish reinforcements in the vicinity; the only serious problem at this stage was the lack of water, for reports had reached the Australian general that there was none nearby, so if Magdhaba was not captured his troops and horses would be in trouble. By 1.50 p.m., after he had encircled the enemy, this had become a matter of urgency and he informed Desert Column that he intended to withdraw because there seemed no chance of seizing Magdhaba soon enough. Chetwode, at Desert Column HQ, was horrified by this message and suggested to Chauvel that a greater concentration of artillery upon one point of the enemy position followed by a bayonet charge might be successful, and it was 'strongly urged that the fight should not be abandoned even at the cost of some casualties'. Chetwode followed this with a second message 'strongly urging' the seizure of Magdhaba. ¹²⁰ Meanwhile, some of Chauvel's men had achieved a notable success by storming one of the redoubts with the result that he was now able to inform his superior that victory was possible. ¹²¹ It was. By 4.30 p.m. the enemy had surrendered and Magdhaba was occupied. The Desert Column's troops captured a significant number of prisoners, including the Turkish commander, and a great deal of equipment. ¹²² Although Chauvel had gained a useful victory he was not able to maintain his position because of a lack of supplies for his men; in any case, he was concerned about the condition of his troops after the exertions of the engagement. ¹²³ Further movements down the Wadi el Arish were therefore out of the question for the present and Chauvel returned to El Arish.

¹²⁰ 'Operations 20 December - 24 December', op. cit. The Official History fails to mention the pressure Chetwode had to place on Chauvel (p. 256). Hill (p. 89) similarly omits this point.

¹²¹ Chauvel telegraphed Chetwode at 2.30 p.m. after he had received orders from HQ to press the attack.

¹²² Official History, p. 257. 23 Dec. 1916, W.O. 95/4366. There is a dispute as to the exact numbers of prisoners: Official History says 1,282, while GHQ's War Diary says there were only about 500.

¹²³ 24 Dec. 1916, W.O. 95/4449. W.T. Massey, The desert campaigns (London, 1918), p. 102.

Murray was delighted with this battle, and all the more so because some of Chetwode's troops had been disappointed at 'not getting a fight' at El Arish. ¹²⁴ However, he did not give it a great deal of attention in his next letter to Robertson, concentrating rather on the future prospects of the EEF. Because of the atmosphere in London, however, the CIGS was far more excited about what had happened than his subordinate: 'You gave us a capital show at Magdhaba and... everything helps. The winter is a bad time for us in general. The public become impatient and so does the War Cabinet. Your little success was therefore all the more welcome'. ¹²⁵

Magdhaba had been a useful victory for everyone, but it had not been an easy operation and it only just succeeded. The Turks had offered stubborn resistance from within a defensive position well supplied with machine-guns; this was surely not the behaviour of an enemy demoralised by British advances. ¹²⁶ If the Turkish infantrymen were not demoralised by sudden British cavalry attacks the EEF's strategy might be in danger: but for the present this was by no means obvious to Chetwode and Dobell.

THE ACTION AT RAFAH

With the victory at Magdhaba under his belt Murray saw his next objective as Rafah. In a conference with Dobell to consider Eastern Force's future movements he had outlined his hopes, which Lynden-Bell repeated to Chetwode: 'His idea was... that if possible we should allow the Turks to collect at Rafah, and not to attack them until our railway was within striking distance, thus placing them at the disadvantage of

¹²⁴ Lynden-Bell to Chetwode 23 Dec. 1916, Chetwode papers PWCI/Folder 1.

¹²⁵ Murray to Robertson 26 Dec. 1916 and Robertson to Murray 10 Jan. 1917, BM Add. MS 52462.

¹²⁶ 23 Dec. 1916, W.O. 95/4366: 'the operations were difficult'.

operating with desert behind them while we had a railway behind ourselves'. ¹²⁷ This was to be a 'systematic advance' with a sting in the tail, and Dobell was happy to agree. However, the C in C allowed for a certain degree of flexibility; he did not wish to restrain Dobell and in turn this message was passed to Chetwode at Desert Column HQ. ¹²⁸

Meanwhile, the RFC reported that the enemy were entrenching near Rafah at El Magruntein. ¹²⁹ Chetwode, encouraged by this information of a Turkish force in a somewhat isolated position and full of confidence after his recent success, now asked permission to 'scupper' the enemy there in a lightning raid like that of Magdhaba. Murray gave his permission with the proviso that a 'sufficient haul' of prisoners should be made to make the operation worth-while. This was actually a far greater concession by Murray than might at first be obvious, for he admitted to Robertson that he wanted to fight the Turks 'in strength' at Rafah rather than at Gaza because the latter would be so much further from his railhead. ¹³⁰ Hence the demand for plenty of prisoners: if he were to allow Chetwode to 'disturb' the enemy at Rafah he wanted to be absolutely sure that the subjection of his strategy to any temporary tactical advantage for Chetwode would not be wasted. Murray gave way and Chetwode gained a victory at Rafah; but one cannot help speculating what might have happened if he had vetoed the Desert Column's commander's plan and the Turks had collected at Rafah. ¹³¹

¹²⁷ Lynden-Bell to Chetwode 3 Jan. 1917, Chetwode papers PWCI/Folder 1.

¹²⁸ Lynden-Bell to GOC Eastern Force 1 Jan. 1917, W.O. 95/4367. Dawney to Chetwode 3 Jan. 1917, Chetwode papers PWCI/Folder 1.

¹²⁹ RFC report 27 Dec. 1917, W.O. 157/711.

¹³⁰ Murray to Robertson 5 Jan. 1917, BM Add.MS 52462.

¹³¹ Murray's lack of enthusiasm for Chetwode's plan was not due to any fear of the risks his cavalry might be taking as the Official History suggests (p. 252); in fact, Chetwode was told by Dawney that such an operation 'would be worth such risks as it would be necessary to take'. See Dawney to Chetwode 3 Jan. 1917, Chetwode papers PWCI/Folder 1.

While the British infantry consolidated the position at El Arish, Chetwode laid his plans for the coming raid. It was decided that the troops who had captured Magdhaba were to be employed with the added reinforcement of the 5th Mounted Brigade and No.7 Light Car Patrol. The advance was begun on 8 January 1917 and continued into the early hours of the following day, with the troops suffering from the intense cold of the Sinai nights. ¹³² Great attention was given to secrecy so that the Turkish troops at El Magruntein were unaware of their danger; steps were taken to keep the Bedouin population away from the enemy and the RFC prevented observation by Turkish aircraft. ¹³³ This was important, for the enemy position was described as 'very strong' with a formidable central position and six other redoubts; but they were weakened by a lack of barbed wire, an oversight that the British considered the 'height of lunacy'. ¹³⁴

Meanwhile, the Desert Column's troops surrounded the enemy defences, and in doing so about half the force crossed the frontier into Turkish Syria, while the town of Rafah was captured on the way. When the attack was finally made, however, the lack of cover and the heavy machine-gun fire meant that progress was slow so that even though the assault had begun at about 10 a.m. General Chauvel, leading the attack, called for a fresh effort at 2.30 p.m. ¹³⁵ Unfortunately, worrying reports now started to reach Chauvel that enemy reinforcements were approaching Rafah and, in fact, when the position was finally taken, the Turkish relief force was only four miles away and 'on the point of becoming engaged'. ¹³⁶ Chauvel now telephoned Chetwode, who was in overall command of the operation, and explained that his own men seemed to have made little progress while enemy columns were closing in from the north. Chetwode was impressed by the danger and actually issued

¹³² Baird diary 14 Jan. 1917, MSS Eur B239.

¹³³ 'Rafah Raid' by Lt.-Col. Fergusson 7 Jan. 1917, W.O. 95/4449.

¹³⁴ 10 Jan. 1917, W.O. 95/4367. Baird diary 7 Jan. 1917.

¹³⁵ Official History, p. 267.

¹³⁶ 10 Jan. 1917, W.O. 95/4367.

orders for the withdrawal of his troops - but events prevented their execution, for even as the two generals spoke some of their troops stormed the Turkish positions. ¹³⁷ It had been a 'rather ticklish business' for the men of the Desert Column, but now Turkish resistance started to crumble and by 5 p.m. the position was carried; Chetwode's plan seemed to have been vindicated. ¹³⁸ A rapid British retirement ~~was~~ was now in order, and this was performed without undue problems from the enemy reinforcements.

In many ways this had been a 'brilliant action' for the British; they captured over 1,500 of the enemy, together with a certain amount of equipment, and had proved that their mounted troops continued to be a formidable factor in the campaign, a factor, indeed, that the Turks could not afford to ignore. Nevertheless the battle revealed a number of worrying signs that tended to be ignored in the euphoria of victory. For one thing, the margin of success had been very fine indeed. Chetwode's nerve did not hold, nor, for that matter, did Chauvel's since it was upon his information that the commander of the Desert Column made his decision to retire. The reasons for the margin of success being so fine are enlightening. The Turks seem to have put up a far stiffer fight than had been expected and, because of this, British casualties were higher than anticipated. ¹³⁹ Moreover, although Chetwode stressed the importance of artillery support for the success of his attack, his actual behaviour in the battle contradicted this, for he decided to leave the additional ammunition carts behind at Sheikh Zowaid, with the result that one of his batteries ran out of rounds in the afternoon, as did some of the machine-guns of the New Zealand regiments. ¹⁴⁰ A

¹³⁷ 'Action at Rafah' by Chauvel. 9 Jan. 1917, W.O. 95/4471. Official History, p. 268.

¹³⁸ Fergusson to D'Ewes 10 Jan. 1917, Fergusson papers DEF/4.

¹³⁹ McGrigor diary 9 and 10 Jan. 1917. Desert Column incurred nearly 500 casualties and while the Official History (p. 270) claims this was not a high figure given the strength of the enemy position it seems to have shocked the British. See Note 10 Jan. 1917, W.O. 95/4449.

¹⁴⁰ Chetwode to HQ Eastern Force 17 Jan. 1917, W.O. 95/4449.

dangerous precedent had been set because the British now believed they could take well-defended Turkish redoubts without adequate artillery support. Chetwode may have gained an exaggerated opinion of the ability of his mounted troops as a result, as seems to be revealed by his report on the engagement:

I confess that I thought the task was almost beyond the capacity of dismounted cavalry to carry through, and it is difficult for me to express my admiration for the dash and gallantry with which their dismounted lines... kept up the forward impulse, and finally stormed the enemy position. ¹⁴¹

However, the action near Rafah had ramifications far beyond the opinion of General Chetwode. Murray was so impressed that he told Robertson he felt sure that if only he had another Cavalry Division he could clear all of southern Palestine. ¹⁴² Robertson, for his part, seems to have been even more affected by the success and revealed a surprising degree of optimism at Murray's future prospects in his comments: 'Mounted troops are the thing. Unofficially I think you can do a great deal with them yet, and can give the old Turk a real great shaking. I am inclined to think it is a case of "l'audace" for you'. ¹⁴³ Nor was the high command of Eastern Force invulnerable to this atmosphere of over-optimism. Dobell congratulated Chetwode on 10 January and confessed that he now believed the Desert Column should strike at 'any bodies of the enemy within our range' - and more significantly still he now saw Gaza as the next objective. ¹⁴⁴ The victory at El Magruntein stirred Dobell to produce a fresh and most sanguine appreciation of the Eastern Force's prospects for the future. ¹⁴⁵ Optimism now swept the EEF and Murray wrote in the following quite remarkable manner to Chetwode in a letter of congratulation: 'I don't mind how far I go into Palestine. Aleppo if you like'. ¹⁴⁶

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Murray to Robertson 10 Jan. 1917, BM Add.MS 52462.

¹⁴³ Robertson to Murray 10 Jan. 1917, BM Add.MS 52462.

¹⁴⁴ Dobell to Chetwode 10 Jan. 1917, Chetwode papers PWCI/Folder 1.

¹⁴⁵ Appreciation of the Situation 11 Jan. 1917, W.O. 95/4471.

¹⁴⁶ Murray to Chetwode 11 Jan. 1917, Chetwode papers PWCI/Folder 1.

MURRAY'S ACHIEVEMENTS BY JANUARY 1917

The victory at Rafah meant that Murray was inundated with lavish congratulations from many sources including King George V and various Egyptian officials such as the High Commissioner, the Prime Minister and the Sultan. ¹⁴⁷ The battle itself was of great significance for the C in C: firstly, his troops actually entered Syria during the engagement so that he could now claim that the Sinai had been cleared of the enemy; secondly, January 1917 was, of course, the anniversary of Murray's arrival in Egypt. Everything seemed to have come together at exactly the right time. Sir Archibald could not resist commenting upon the fact when he wrote to Robertson on 10 January 1917: 'I took over just one year ago today, so it is gratifying to me to have within the year driven all forward bodies of Turks out of Egyptian Territory'. ¹⁴⁸

Nor were others slow to see the precise meaning of these events and their timing. Dobell added a personal touch when he replied to Murray's telegram of congratulation for the success at Rafah: 'It is an additional gratification that recent operations should have given the Eastern Force the opportunity of furnishing the success to crown your strenuous year's work'. ¹⁴⁹ The War Cabinet, meanwhile, authorised the CIGS to congratulate Murray on its behalf and Robertson took the opportunity to praise the C in C not only for his recent victory but also for his achievement in reoccupying the Sinai. ¹⁵⁰

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- ¹⁴⁷ Congratulatory telegrams from the King, General Milne, the Sultan, High Commissioner and Prime Minister of Egypt, Murray papers 79/48/3. Reuters telegram 12 Jan. 1917, Chetwode papers PWCI/Folder 1. 'The Egyptian Province of Sinai is now clear of Turkish troops'. This was not strictly true since the Turks reoccupied positions in central Sinai briefly in February and they still had men at Aqaba in the extreme south.
- ¹⁴⁸ Murray to Robertson 10 Jan. 1917, BM Add.MS 52462.
- ¹⁴⁹ Dobell to Murray 11 Jan. 1917, Murray papers 79/48/3.
- ¹⁵⁰ War Cabinet meeting 11 Jan. 1917, CAB 23/1. CIGS to GOC in C Egypt 11 Jan. 1917, Murray papers 79/48/3.

Murray's star was certainly in the ascendant in London early in 1917. In fact, Robertson could not praise his friend too highly - or so it seemed. He told Wigram that Murray had 'done very well indeed' while Monro was informed that the EEF had 'shaken up the Turk well'. ¹⁵¹ Such timely military successes eased the CIGS' position at the War Cabinet where the politicians continued to make life difficult for the embattled Robertson; there was, therefore, a certain degree of deeply-felt personal gratitude behind his expression of thanks when he explained the circumstances to Murray: 'They are giving me a good deal of trouble. It is very satisfactory however to know how well your operations have worked out and may continue to do so'. ¹⁵² Maurice Hankey had also been impressed by the EEF's accomplishments and he wrote Murray a personal letter of congratulation along with a request for any advice for the struggling War Cabinet in London: such was the level of Murray's prestige at this stage of the war! ¹⁵³

That this adulation was not merely a matter of words can be demonstrated by what happened next. There were those in London who felt Murray had been poorly done by so far since he was still not a substantive full general - and representations were made to Lord Derby. ¹⁵⁴ The result was that on 20 January 1917 Murray received a telegram from the Secretary of State for War informing him he had been awarded the G. C. M. G.

This was the high point of Murray's command in Egypt, although he did not know at the time, and from now on things were to go wrong; but in January 1917 he was the toast of many - and not without reason, for he had achieved a great deal with the minimum of resources, both in men and equipment. Almost a year later the General Staff assessed his

Robertson papers

- ¹⁵¹ Robertson to Wigram 12 Jan. 1917, I/12/31 and Robertson to Monro 31 Jan. 1917, Robertson papers I/32/53.
¹⁵² Robertson to Murray 31 Jan. 1917, Robertson papers I/32/54.
¹⁵³ Murray to Hankey 9 Feb. 1917, HNKY 4/9.
¹⁵⁴ Repington, pp. 434-6, 439, 441. 18-20 Jan. 1917.

performance up to January 1917 in the following terms:

it must be recognised that to his skill in reorganising the forces evacuated from Gallipoli and the administrative ability he displayed in overcoming the difficulties of the Sinai desert, which has for centuries foiled invaders... our subsequent successes in Palestine are largely due. ¹⁵⁵

It would be difficult not to agree with this description of Murray's achievements. He had resolved the chaos in Egypt which greeted him in 1916; he had crossed the Sinai and laid the basis for future advances; and in doing both these he had fulfilled his original instructions drafted by Robertson. This was surely success by any definition of the word and some have described his attainments more lavishly than this. General Allenby would later write of Murray's 'brilliant' Sinai campaign, a comment which Lynden-Bell, for one, considered to be 'no exaggeration'. ¹⁵⁶ It is often said that 'nothing succeeds like success', but in Murray's case it was his very success that ultimately led to his own failure for, in a War Cabinet desperate for any morale-boosting victory at a period when the British people were becoming war-weary, the C in C of the EEF was almost inevitably bound to be asked to attempt too much with too little. The tragedy was that he responded to this fresh call: 'Sir A.M. could have rested on his laurels after the campaign but his sense of loyalty to the Cabinet induced him to attempt an impossible job'. ¹⁵⁷

One cannot help but make mention, also, of Murray's reorganisation of the EEF after Romani which, without doubt, had been vindicated by these events. Dobell and his Eastern Force proved the ideal weapon in the final clearance of the Sinai Peninsula and performed as well as Murray could ever have hoped. However, Eastern Force, too, was to be a victim of its own success, for in the months ahead it was to attempt, and then be ordered to attempt, operations that were clearly beyond its limited resources.

¹⁵⁵ 'Review of the Military Situation in All Theatres of War during 1917.' 18 Dec. 1917, Lloyd George papers F/44/3/40.

¹⁵⁶ Lynden-Bell to MacMunn 15 Nov. 1917, CAB 45/78.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

CHAPTER 11

LLOYD GEORGE AND THE WAR CABINET PUSH FOR ACTION IN SYRIA

DECEMBER 1916 - FEBRUARY 1917

'In that day shall there be a highway out of Egypt to Assyria...'

Isaiah 19 v 23

PLANS FOR AN INVASION OF PALESTINE ARE LAID IN LONDON

On 7 December 1916 Lloyd George succeeded Asquith as Prime Minister of Great Britain with a new Government and a much smaller decision-making body known as the War Cabinet, which replaced the larger War Committee. The Prime Minister set the tone for the rest of his premiership by immediately asking the CIGS to list the various aspects of the war that needed attention. The CIGS responded with a letter in which he suggested that Britain might enjoy 'some little success' in Egypt and Mesopotamia during the winter and so 'shake up the Turk a little.'¹ Robertson could not have been much more cautious about the EEF's prospects; but he had mentioned Egypt and helped to set the agenda of the new Government. Meanwhile, Maurice Hankey had been working overtime to produce a memorandum for the Prime Minister giving his advice as to British strategy in all theatres of the war before the first meeting of the War Cabinet on 9 December 1916. If Robertson was somewhat coy about any British prospects of success from Egypt, Hankey certainly was not. He felt that the Allies badly needed a victory to off-set the recent final defeat of Rumania by the Germans after that country's accession to the Allied cause had seemed to offer such hope in August; and he looked to the occupation of either Jerusalem or Damascus to provide the sort of success required which might also materially aid the Russians in the Caucasus.² Hankey's vision for the EEF was a most ambitious one

¹ Robertson to Lloyd George, 8 Dec. 1916, Robertson papers I/19/9.

² Personal Memorandum by Hankey, 8 Dec. 1916, CAB 63/15.

involving, he hoped, the transfer of divisions from Salonica and co-operation with the Russians and British forces in Mesopotamia.

In a sense these two contrasting pieces of advice reflected the division that was becoming apparent in London at the very highest level of British decision-making: on the one side was Robertson advocating the possibility of only limited successes in Egypt, while on the other was Hankey pressing for a major campaign into Palestine, presumably requiring heavy reinforcement for the EEF. Robertson later admitted that the General Staff were really opposed to a major Syrian offensive, but had to agree to it 'for the sake of peace' and in order to win Lloyd George's consent to further action in France; it was all a question of 'give and take' between the CIGS and the Prime Minister, with Murray as one of the leading pawns in the game, therefore. *

But in another sense it was all much more complex than this rather simplistic conclusion suggests. In his note of 8 December 1916, Robertson hints at something he later tried to obscure - a genuine, if rather limited, enthusiasm for Murray's prospects, an enthusiasm that we have already seen the CIGS display in his personal correspondence with Sir Archibald. Robertson had vacillated somewhat in his attitude towards this campaign earlier in the year. In terms of the EEF's operations the new Prime Minister's arrival on the scene and determination to act decisively could not have been better timed, for even as Robertson penned his reply to Lloyd George's request for information preparations were being made in the Sinai for the move to El Arish. Consequently, all was ready for a debate about operations beyond the Sinai and from the perspective of Whitehall it was easy to believe that a few discussions and telegrams constituted a major initiative by the War Cabinet. This was precisely how Hankey recalled these events for Lloyd George in 1920:

* Robertson to Edmonds, 4 Feb. 1926, CAB 45/80.

When you came into office this operation [El Arish] was already decided and was to come off in a few days. Before you had been in office three days you had stirred General Murray up about it and had made enquiries as to the possibility of extending the scope of the operations. ⁴

At one level this is a correct interpretation of events in Whitehall in early December 1916 - but only in terms of the somewhat limited perspective of London. In reality, of course, this description is a travesty of the truth as far as Murray was concerned, since his operations in the Sinai had already attained a momentum of their own that would push him to the brink of Palestine by January 1917, and even to the vicinity of Gaza by March, regardless of deliberations in London. Murray had been considering operations beyond El Arish since February 1916, and now that his plans were finally coming to fruition he was unlikely to fail to execute them; he had, after all, waited long enough for this moment and, moreover, as it turned out, the period from August 1916 until the Rafah engagement in January 1917 probably marked Murray's pinnacle of achievement in Egypt, and his reputation in London was correspondingly high at this time, as we have seen. It is unfortunate, therefore, that subsequent accounts of this period of British strategy have given too much attention to a change in leadership in Whitehall and insufficient to the bare military facts in the Sinai. ⁵

According to the minutes of the first meeting of the War Cabinet on 9 December 1916, the subject of El Arish was barely mentioned; but it seems likely that, for reasons of secrecy, full details of a discussion upon the subject were not recorded. ⁶ Lloyd George must

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- ⁴ Hankey to Lloyd George, 7 Feb. 1920, Lloyd George papers F/24/2/8.
 - ⁵ The knowledge of Murray's subsequent failures at Gaza has also tended to influence accounts of his successes at the end of 1916 and, consequently, to detract from the very real prestige that he did enjoy in London at this time.
 - ⁶ War Cabinet meeting 9 Dec. 1916, CAB 23/1. 'The Narrative of War Cabinet and War Committee Decisions in regard to Gen. Murray's Operations, 1916-1917', by Hankey, 7 Feb. 1920, Lloyd George papers F/24/2/8 (b).

have pressed the CIGS about action beyond El Arish either at this very meeting or 'immediately after', therefore. Whatever the precise sequence of events the result was a telegram from Robertson to Murray dated the same day; in it the CIGS explained that he had been approached by the Prime Minister about making the EEF's current operations as successful as possible, and he therefore wished for an outline of Murray's intentions beyond El Arish. This telegram undoubtedly contained a fresh degree of urgency which would seem to reflect the Prime Minister's influence.⁷ On the other hand, we should be careful not to over-dramatise this telegram and its results; it was 'in no sense an order for any advance beyond the El Arish operation as originally contemplated', but rather an enquiry as to what General Murray believed could be done in the future and what reinforcements he required. ●

Sir Archibald, sensing the urgency of his Chief's request, replied on the following day with a lengthy telegram. His opening remarks emphasized that the contents of Robertson's telegram had not caught him unprepared or even unsympathetic: 'I have always thought important results might be secured by an advance by us from Arish into Syria. At the present moment I am endeavouring to make as large a success as I can at Arish.'⁸ As far as the immediate details of his advance were concerned he explained that he hoped to move on Rafah, and then he added he might make for Beersheba 'if circumstances permit'. In his desire to reply promptly to Robertson's communications Sir Archibald had evidently decided to lay bare before his superior what were, at present at least, only his personal ideas for future operations. No definite plans had been laid

⁷ CIGS to Murray, 9 Dec. 1916, W.O. 106/715. On the same day the Directorate of Military Operations at the War Office asked the EEF when it might expect plans 'regarding further advance'. See Gen. Maurice, D.M.O. to Gen. Lynden-Bell, GHQ Egypt, 9 Dec. 1916, W.O. 106/715.

● 'The Narrative of War Committee and War Cabinet Decisions', op.cit.

● Murray to CIGS, 10 Dec. 1916, W.O. 106/715.

as yet by him or his staff since, as he was at pains to make clear, after the seizure of El Arish his advance could not be rapid due to supply difficulties, and he also asked for the temporary loan of two divisions from Mesopotamia. ¹⁰

Meanwhile, the War Office had not been idle and had made a rapid assessment of the Prime Minister's hopes on the same day as Murray's reply to the CIGS. The Military Operations Department argued that the kind of 'far-reaching results' presumably desired by Lloyd George and hinted at in the telegram of 9 December 1916, were only to be obtained by an advance as far as Jerusalem. However, the first step towards such a major offensive would have to be the occupation of the Gaza-Beersheba line as recommended by Murray himself in his own telegram, although this might not be so easy if the Turks managed to avoid serious defeat at El Arish and the EEF's supply problems continued north of the Sinai. ¹¹

Two days later the CIGS again contacted Murray and again it was at the instigation of the Prime Minister. This time he explained that Lloyd George had seen Murray's telegram of 10 December 1916 and now wanted him to make 'the maximum possible effort during the winter.' He also explained that any troops from Mesopotamia could not be sent before the spring of 1917, so that if Murray wanted reinforcements before this they would have to be drawn from either France or Salonica. ¹² According to Hankey this telegram was not sent on the authority of the War Cabinet, since the Prime Minister had been ill with a bad cold, and so not present at its meetings; the CIGS must have seen him about it privately, therefore. ¹² Lloyd

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Memorandum on El Arish Operations, 10 Dec. 1916, W.O. 106/715.

¹² CIGS to Murray, 12 Dec. 1916, W.O. 106/715.

George's intentions had now become clear to Robertson, for on the same day he wrote to Haig and explained that the Prime Minister wished to get to Jerusalem and wanted two divisions from the Western Front for this very purpose that winter. ¹³ This must have concerned the CIGS somewhat for any drain upon British forces in France, the decisive theatre of war as far as he believed, was a serious matter and gave a whole new complexion to any fresh operations into Syria. This fact no doubt helps to explain what happened next.

In the meantime Robertson and his staff had been busy and produced a second memorandum on the subject of Murray's operations on 12 December 1916, which reflected views somewhat different to those of his recent telegram to the general. The CIGS argued that troops from France could not possibly be moved to Egypt in time because of the shipping problems in the Mediterranean. Moreover he suggested that Sir Archibald actually had sufficient troops for an advance to Beersheba which was the obvious next move for the EEF and beyond which no one need look just yet, because the railway had to be pushed forward to this new line. ¹⁴

¹³ The Narrative of War Committee and War Cabinet Decisions, op.cit. Robertson to Haig, 12 Dec. 1916, quoted in J. Terraine, Douglas Haig: the educated soldier (London, 1963), p.252. No mention had been made in the telegram to Murray about Jerusalem.

¹⁴ Note on Proposed Operations on the Eastern Frontier of Egypt, by CIGS 12 Dec. 1916, W.O. 106/715.

Murray replied most promptly to Robertson's second telegram. He now stated that he definitely needed one additional division to hold El Arish and advance to Rafah (which was consistent with his estimate in February 1916 that he would need 5 divisions for an advance to El Arish), while he required an extra division for any move to Beersheba.

¹⁵ Sir Archibald outlined his immediate plans in more detail in a memorandum despatched to the CIGS on the same day as his telegram. This paper talked of a necessary 'transition stage' for the EEF beyond El Arish as it entered Syria and described the best route of advance towards the Beersheba position. ¹⁶ Murray was clearly not thinking in terms of grand strategic design, therefore.

There now followed a telegram that has caused some debate. The CIGS contacted Murray on 15 December 1916 in order to explain what was expected of the general:

In order that any possibility of misunderstanding may be removed, I wish to make it clear that notwithstanding the instructions recently sent to you that you should make your maximum effort during the winter, your primary mission remains unchanged, that is to say, it is the defence of Egypt. You will be informed if and when the War Cabinet changes this policy. ¹⁷

The CIGS also admitted that Sir Archibald would not get any extra troops at present and ought to do all he could to economise the number of men employed behind his front lines so that these could be released for active operations. ¹⁸ This telegram was not based upon any discussions at the War Cabinet, and may even have been sent upon the personal authority of the CIGS alone, since Maurice Hankey could find no evidence after the war of Robertson having seen Lloyd George, who was again ill, privately on the matter. ¹⁹ Murray in Egypt knew

¹⁵ Murray to CIGS, 13 Dec. 1916, W.O. 106/715.

¹⁶ Murray to CIGS G.S. Z/33/1, 13 Dec. 1916, W.O. 106/715.

¹⁷ CIGS to Murray, 15 Dec. 1916, W.O. 106/715.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ The Narrative of War Committee and War Cabinet Decisions, op.cit.

none of this, of course, and assumed that this communication reflected a fresh decision by the War Cabinet, which quite naturally tended to give him the impression that there was a certain degree of confusion in London. ²⁰ Clearly Robertson had become most concerned about the increasing demands for troops made by the Prime Minister and even by his own general on the edge of Syria. He therefore decided to restate the original intention behind the El Arish operations and seemed to be putting a point of view that owed a great deal to his paper of 12 December 1916. Indeed, as Hankey himself admitted after the war, this telegram did accord with the initial conception of the El Arish expedition as an 'offensive defensive', since the CIGS still asked Murray to act as aggressively as he could in the meantime. ²¹ Presumably by such words the CIGS had in mind an advance to Beersheba even if he made no mention of any locations in his telegram.

That Robertson was expecting an advance by the EEF of this kind can be easily proved by reference to perhaps his most important statement of views about this campaign so far in the war. At the end of December the CIGS produced a detailed memorandum arguing for a serious campaign in Syria to capture Jerusalem in the winter months of 1917, and not 1916. However, he inserted one most significant condition: 'If all... of these objects are to be obtained, it is essential that our invasion of Palestine should have made marked progress within the next few months,' ²² He was, therefore, placing a considerable degree of responsibility for the future success of this campaign upon the shoulders of Murray, from whom he had only recently withheld reinforcements. With considerable skill Robertson proceeded to demolish any arguments for a serious invasion of Syria in the early

²⁰ Murray Despatches, Fourth Despatch, 28 June 1917, p. 131.

²¹ Notes on Murray's Despatch of 28 June 1917, by Hankey, Lloyd George papers F/24/2/8(a).

²² 'Note on a proposal to undertake a campaign in Palestine during the winter months with the object of capturing Jerusalem', by CIGS, 29 Dec. 1916, W.O. 106/715.

months of 1917. He raised and then rejected the option of an amphibious attack along the coast because of the dangers of such action revealed at Gallipoli; consequently, he argued, the advance could only be over land and would, as a result, be slow since the railway had to be laid from Rafah to the Gaza line from which any future operations should be launched. With these assumptions in mind he estimated that even under the most favourable circumstances the invasion of what he called 'Lower Palestine' could not begin before April, and so there was no chance of any operations by the EEF in the next few months that 'would affect the course of the war as a whole.' In order to reach Jerusalem he calculated that Murray ought to be reinforced with three extra divisions and since any such operation could not commence until April these troops would have to be removed from France 'at the very time when operations of the utmost importance were about to begin.' However, the CIGS concluded his paper with a paragraph designed to win over the War Cabinet in which he suggested a campaign to occupy Syria in the autumn and winter of 1917 that 'will not be open to the same objections' as a similar one in the next few months. He even put forward the possibility that this later campaign might push the EEF as far as Beirut or Damascus. In the meantime, Murray might be instructed to establish himself in a position he could hold defensively in the summer and use as a 'starting point' for the advance in the autumn. ²³

The CIGS had argued his case well, for at the meeting of the War Cabinet on 2 January 1917 his memorandum was accepted in principle. ²⁴ However, Sir Archibald was not informed of this decision until 11 January 1917, since Robertson had to dash off to an Allied conference at Rome after the War Cabinet meeting and he did not return until 9 January 1917. ²⁵ Some days later General Nivelle, the new French C in C, came to London and the CIGS promised to extend the British

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ War Cabinet meeting 2 Jan. 1917, CAB 23/1.

²⁵ Notes on Murray's Despatch, op. cit.

line on the Western Front by the addition of an extra division from Egypt. ²⁶ Murray, therefore, lost the 42nd Division which sailed from Egypt early in March; this was, he considered, his best division. His response was predictable: although his task was now primarily the defence of Egypt until the autumn he nonetheless repeated his belief that he needed five divisions to safeguard his gains, ^{divisions} which, of course, he did not have. ²⁷ The CIGS, however, did not agree; on 2 January 1917 he plainly stated that Murray only needed four divisions both to defend the country and threaten the Turks in Syria. ²⁸

Robertson tried to explain these decisions to his subordinate in a remarkably apologetic private letter. He indicated that he realised Murray might find the new policy 'a little disappointing' but assured him that he had 'every intention of giving you a good show later on.' ²⁹ On the last day of January the CIGS again wrote to Murray and in what he described as a 'quite unofficial' letter he sought to give the commander of the EEF some idea of what was in his mind for the autumn since, as yet, Murray had received no definite instructions. He asked Sir Archibald for any suggestions or requests he wanted to make towards a campaign in the autumn and then confessed how optimistic he really was: 'Your operations have hitherto been conducted so successfully that I have every hope that you will give the Turk a real big and good shaking next autumn if only I can fit you out with what you need.' ³⁰

Moreover, in a letter to General Monro the CIGS revealed that he saw Murray's autumn offensive as 'a second string to our bow' if no big success was obtained in France so as to maintain popular support for

²⁶ The Narrative of War Committee and War Cabinet Decisions, op.cit.

²⁷ Murray Despatches, Fourth Despatch, 28 June 1917, pp.131-132.

²⁸ Note on our Future Military Policy, 2 Jan. 1917, CAB 1/22/7.

²⁹ Robertson to Murray, 10 Jan. 1917, BM Add. MS 52462.

³⁰ Robertson to Murray, 31 Jan. 1917, Robertson papers I/32/54.

the war. ³¹ Although he was not getting sufficient troops Murray was, nonetheless, right at the very heart of the CIGS's long-term strategic plans early in 1917.

This kind of intense enthusiasm for a major campaign in Syria was articulated in detail in a most secret document written by the CIGS towards the end of February. Drawing upon the basic policy outlined in his paper of 29 December 1916, Robertson detailed how he intended to raise the equivalent of three extra divisions for the EEF from various sources. If, he argued, Murray had six divisions on the Gaza-Beersheba line by the autumn, then he could see little difficulty in an advance to Jerusalem, although any move beyond this point would be hampered by transport difficulties and might, therefore, be quite slow. In conclusion the CIGS explained the full extent of his plans:

Generally speaking, if the War Cabinet eventually decides that, owing to lack of success of our operations this year on the Western Front... the campaign in Syria is to take precedence either for a given period or for the remainder of the war over operations in France, the only limitation which would prevent us from concentrating a sufficient force in Egypt to inflict upon the Turks a serious defeat is the power of the Navy to transport and maintain the recovery of troops. ³²

With so much being hoped for in the autumn for the EEF a greater degree of attention than ever before was bound to be given to Murray's operations in the coming months as he advanced towards what many hoped would be the starting-line for a major offensive.

³¹ Robertson to Monro 31 Jan. 1917, Robertson papers I/32/53.

³² Plan for a Campaign in Syria by CIGS 22 Feb. 1917, CAB 21/13.

MURRAY PREPARES FOR HIS NEXT BATTLE AFTER RAFAH

Murray's confidence and that of the EEF had certainly been boosted by the victories at Maghdhaba and Rafah. Dobell was enthusiastic about future prospects; he believed he now possessed sufficient forces to press his advance along the coast with all speed and send his mounted troops forward to re-occupy Rafah. ²³ But, in fact, not everyone showed this degree of optimism and some cautionary voices were raised in opposition to an unduly aggressive posture by the EEF. Dawnay, for example, had misgivings about his Chief's plan; he was worried that the enemy might try to draw the Desert Column's cavalry into a trap, and criticised any intention of taking Rafah solely with mounted troops, as Dobell had suggested. Chetwode also had misgivings; he did not want his troops to advance too far beyond the railhead and pipe-line, nor did he accept Dobell's argument that landing supplies from the sea could overcome such difficulties. ²⁴ In fact, the pipe-line did not reach El Arish until 5 February 1917, although the railway was already being laid beyond there by this date. Murray, too, expressed his concern and sounded a cautionary note through Lynden-Bell:

I think you have done quite enough damage in the way of raids, and I do not fancy that we shall be able to repeat the experiment again, at any rate for some time, and the Chief is all against trying the same trick too often. ²⁵

Other factors also militated against any daring forward movements beyond a secure base. The British were experiencing problems with the railway amidst the sand dunes around El Arish, and these

²³ Appreciation of the Situation, 11 Jan. 1917, W.O. 95/4471. Australian Official History, p.245. This gives the impression that all of the EEF was now filled with boundless optimism!

²⁴ Dawnay to GOC Desert Column, 14 Jan. 1917, and Chetwode to HQ Eastern Force, 16 Jan. 1917, W.O. 95/4471.

²⁵ Lynden-Bell to Chetwode, 18 Jan. 1917, Chetwode papers PWCI/Folder 1.

difficulties were compounded by enemy air attacks upon the Egyptian working parties along the line. ⁹⁶ Further problems were caused by the decision of the CIGS to remove one division from Murray for France. The C in C was furious about this loss of troops and vented his feelings about it in a letter to Chetwode:

At the same time as they withdraw my troops they ask me to be as active as I can... and perhaps give them something to put in the papers in the dull season. It is working on the principle of we give you as little as we can and take from you as much as we can but should like, and expect, you... to gain some success. ⁹⁷

Not only did this decision mean Sir Archibald had lost an entire division but it also forced upon him a necessary degree of reorganization within the EEF so that the 53rd Division could replace the departing 42nd.

Along with this reduction in forces was an additional problem, one that finds no mention in the official account of this campaign, but which undoubtedly influenced events: the problem of personalities. The fact remains that there was a certain amount of tension within the command-structure of the EEF. For example, Dawnay became concerned that what he called his 'hectoring disposition' had made him unpopular at GHQ. ⁹⁸ Such tensions could be inflamed by any disagreement over strategy or tactics. Dawnay was accused of being too 'self-willed' and this may have partly been caused by a division of opinion between Eastern Force and GHQ over the necessary reorganisation of certain troops. ⁹⁹ Although there were no major changes in the senior personnel of the EEF during the period before the First Battle of

⁹⁶ Murray to Robertson, 11 Feb. 1917, BM Add. MS 52462.

⁹⁷ Murray to Chetwode, 24 Jan. 1917, Chetwode papers PWCI/Folder 1.

⁹⁸ Dawnay diary, 1 Jan. 1917.

⁹⁹ Dawnay diary, 13 Feb. 1917, 7 Jan. 1917, W.O. 95/4367. This disagreement was caused by GHQ not wishing a unit to be reorganised at El Arish as it would use the railway at a very busy time when the line was needed for construction trains.

Gaza this does not reflect a degree of harmony; there could be considerable dissension, as when General Smith of the 52nd Division complained to Lynden-Bell about the 'undue risks' being taken by Eastern Force with which he was 'entirely out of sympathy'. Unfortunately for Smith, the EEF's Chief of Staff () recounted this conversation to Murray and Dobell; even so, while Murray felt Smith ought to be replaced, no action was taken by Dobell. ⁴⁰

Meanwhile, a certain amount of subterfuge was being conducted at the highest levels of command within the EEF, for Lynden-Bell agreed with Chetwode to conceal from Dobell that they were corresponding regularly with each other over the most sensitive matters of strategy. Lynden-Bell even admitted to Chetwode why he did not intend to tell Dobell of their secret correspondence:

I shall certainly not mention to Dobell that you are writing to me; not that I want to conceal anything from Dobell, but it is of such importance to us to get your letters that I do not wish to raise any question with Dobell as to your communications with us direct. ⁴¹

With this kind of activity being condoned by Murray, one finds it hard to believe that there could be a great deal of confidence in Dobell within GHQ. However, one reason for Chetwode's secret correspondence was probably his friendship with the C in C, which surprised officers of the Desert Column by its intimacy and may have clouded Murray's better judgement. ⁴² On the other hand, Chetwode felt none too secure in his position as commander of the Desert Column, himself, and Lynden-Bell had to reassure him that Dobell would not replace him when Eastern Force moved its HQ to El Arish. ⁴³

⁴⁰ Dobell to Chetwode, 13 Feb. 1917, Chetwode papers PWCI/Folder 2.

⁴¹ Lynden-Bell to Chetwode, 3 Jan. 1917, Chetwode papers PWCI/Folder 1.

⁴² Fergusson to D'Ewes, 28 Feb. 1917, Fergusson papers DEF/4. Fergusson comments that since the two were such good friends any inspection of the Desert Column by the C in C was a 'foregone conclusion'.

⁴³ Lynden-Bell to Chetwode, 22 Jan. 1917, Chetwode papers PWCI/Folder 1.

In part, some of these tensions reflected the inherent weakness of the command-structure of the EEF. For one thing, the Eastern Force command had to cover the entire Sinai desert containing very difficult terrain with a climate far from benign to troops not accustomed to its rigours. ⁴⁴ More serious, however, for the effective leadership of the EEF was the actual failure of the three separate HQ's of the army to interact with success; it was all 'very serious', as Chetwode himself admitted, because there were a number of anomalies: 'Murray at Cairo... Dobell... technically over me - and myself actually in command at the front. It was therefore difficult to get approval for things sometimes.' ⁴⁵ Murray's distance from the front meant that he felt it necessary to visit the troops and inspect their progress. He kept his intentions secret from most of his officers until the last minute, and arrived at El Arish on 27 February 1917, his visit lasting until 2 March. ⁴⁶ Even though Murray arrived with the minimum of fuss his tour of inspection caused a certain amount of disruption simply because the senior officers found themselves having to accompany the Chief wherever he went: 'the presence of "the maximus" has rather checked serious business', was Chetwode's assessment. ⁴⁷ Murray, Dobell and Chetwode all found the existing hierarchy of command far from perfect, therefore. The C in C must take much of the responsibility for this but, of equal importance, is just how much he and his officers managed to achieve in spite of these inherent difficulties.

Meanwhile, plans were starting to form in Murray's mind. He was determined to meet and defeat a significant Turkish force in a major battle; this might be achieved, he believed, either by the defeat of an enemy force in entrenched positions or by the repulse of a serious Turkish counter-attack upon Eastern Force. With the second of these options in mind he ordered the defences at El Arish strengthened to

⁴⁴ Dawnay diary, 18 Jan. 1917.

⁴⁵ Chetwode to MacMunn, 25 Oct. 1925, CAB 45/78.

⁴⁶ Murray diary, 27 Feb. 1917.

⁴⁷ Dawnay diary, 4 Mar. 1917, Chetwode to Dobell, 2 Mar. 1917, Chetwode papers PWCI/Folder 2.

such an extent that they could resist an attack by up to six Turkish divisions - the maximum number he believed the enemy could possibly employ against the town. He obviously considered a repeat of events at Romani not impossible, so we should not see such preparations as merely defensive, although he had always seen the occupation of El Arish as the final action required to secure Egypt from attack. ⁴⁸

As for the first option, Murray freely expressed his opinions as to how events would unfold even to the extent of predicting the date of his next battle. On 22 January 1917, for example, he told Robertson that he expected to be facing a strongly entrenched Turkish force by the first week in March. ⁴⁹ In a letter written only four days previously he had estimated the date as 'about the second week in March', and gave the location of the expected clash: Sheikh Nuran just east of El Shellal. ⁵⁰

Murray not only intended to fix the date of the coming conflict, he also wished to determine its very nature. There was no chance of the EEF 'hanging our heads out without due preparation' before a well-sited defensive position, as Lynden-Bell reassured Chetwode: 'The Chief and myself have seen far too many attacks against entrenched positions to agree to such a proposal for a single moment.' ⁵¹ He consequently hoped to move on Sheikh Zowaid as fast as his railway would allow in the hope that the enemy would make a stand at Sheikh Nuran, thus allowing Eastern Force to launch a 'deliberate attack'. He anticipated a battle lasting between two and three days with any success being exploited by the daring use of cavalry. In order to win such an engagement Murray was determined to develop fully all

⁴⁸ Murray to Chetwode, 11 Jan. 1917, Chetwode papers PWCI/Folder 1.

⁴⁹ GOC in C Egypt to CIGS, 22 Jan. 1917, W.O. 33/905.

⁵⁰ Murray to Robertson, 18 Jan. 1917, BM Add. MS 52462.

⁵¹ Lynden-Bell to Chetwode, 22 Jan. 1917, Chetwode papers PWCI/Folder 1.

his resources, including tanks and heavy artillery. ⁵² He had long shown a special interest in all the latest equipment available to a British general and he now hoped to use it in an effort to fight a most modern battle.

In October of 1916 Robertson had originally asked Murray if he would like 10 or 12 of the new tanks for his El Arish campaign; this was only a suggestion by the CIGS, but Murray leapt at the chance, saying he believed they might 'very likely be the deciding factor' in his current operations. ⁵³ However, problems soon started to arise; in November the Ministry of Munitions decided that tanks were 'totally unsuitable' for the Egyptian climate and could not be altered in time for any action at El Arish (i.e. in December). ⁵⁴ Murray, meanwhile, seems to have made his own enquiries and later in the same month he received a description of the tank's capabilities which stressed that these new machines could not do half of what the 'Daily Mail' claimed for them! ⁵⁵ But extravagant claims concerning the performance of the tank were not a problem in Egypt since censorship was so vigorous the EEF's officers did not even know what one looked like until early in December. ⁵⁶ Nevertheless, in spite of these misgivings on the part of the experts, it was decided to ship the new equipment to Egypt, a decision which caused some consternation at GHQ as Lynden-Bell's brief note to Eastern Force suggests: 'Will you please say what you wish done with them on arrival.' ⁵⁷ While the EEF's senior staff officer may have been at a loss as to what to do with the tanks, his Chief was not; Murray ordered them to be disembarked at Qantara, and not at Alexandria, in order to avoid publicity, and then to be

⁵² Murray to Chetwode, 24 Jan. 1917, op.cit.

⁵³ CIGS to GOC in C Egypt, 20 Oct. 1916, and GOC in C Egypt to CIGS, 21 Oct. 1916, W.O. 33/905.

⁵⁴ War Office to GHQ Egypt, 6 Nov. 1916, W.O. 33/905.

⁵⁵ Lt.-Col. Hugh Elles HQ Heavy Branch, Advanced GHQ (France) to Murray, 20 Nov. 1916, W.O. 95/4366.

⁵⁶ Fergusson to D'Ewes, 8 Dec. 1916, Fergusson papers DEF/4.

⁵⁷ Lynden-Bell to GOC Eastern Force, 15 Dec. 1916, W.O. 95/4366.

moved rapidly to the Sinai for trials 'in view of the present uncertainty as to whether "tanks" can be usefully employed in the desert.' ⁵⁸ However, these arrangements fell through because the trained personnel needed to assemble the tanks once disembarked had travelled in different ships; consequently the equipment had to wait uselessly in Alexandria for its personnel. ⁵⁹ The tanks failed to arrive in time for operations at El Arish, therefore, but they were soon moved to the Sinai and GHQ kept a close eye on their progress as they underwent trials. ⁶⁰ One reason for Murray's enthusiasm for the tanks was the successful use of caterpillar tractors to pull heavy guns and wagons through the desert up to Romani; and he had demanded further trials along these lines well over a month before the tanks reached Egypt. ⁶¹ Since additional heavy artillery arrived in Egypt along with the tanks, Murray's thinking appears entirely consistent: he wished to employ his maximum firepower against the enemy, for he saw the importance of an effective artillery bombardment if an attack was to be made upon prepared positions, as he anticipated.

An additional method of increasing the EEF's effectiveness in this area was the possible use of gas. GHQ considered the subject and the War Office actually appointed an official adviser, although it was decided that cylinder gas would not be used, so gas shells were ordered from London. ⁶² This was not a decision which could be taken lightly because of the danger of reprisals, so the EEF at once took steps to establish a Central Gas School with the intention of educating its troops in the use of, and defence against, gas. ⁶³ Nor could any decision to use gas against the Turks be made without reference to the War Cabinet, because when the subject had previously

⁵⁸ GHQ to GOC Eastern Force, 22 Dec. 1916, W.O. 95/4366.

⁵⁹ Lynden-Bell to GOC Alexandria District, 1 Jan. 1917, W.O. 95/4367. Murray to Robertson, 5 Jan. 1917, BM Add, MS 52462.

⁶⁰ Lynden-Bell to Chetwode, 29 Jan. 1917, Chetwode papers PWCI/Folder 1.

⁶¹ Lynden-Bell to GOC Eastern Force, 11 Nov. 1916, W.O. 95/4366.

⁶² Lynden-Bell to GOC Eastern Force, 3 Jan. 1917, W.O. 95/4367.

⁶³ 25 Jan. 1917, W.O. 95/4367.

been raised in London during the Gallipoli campaign the politicians had decided not to authorise its employment unless the enemy used it first. Now, however, the War Cabinet felt 'no hesitation' in giving Murray permission, largely due to the Turks' appalling treatment of Allied prisoners. ⁶⁴

In using tanks, gas and heavy artillery the EEF's C in C hoped to gain superiority over an enemy force in fixed positions, with the added advantage that such weapons suddenly unveiled could be a shock to the Turks. ⁶⁵ In order to gain the full value from his new equipment Murray remained determined only to unleash it when he faced a major enemy concentration, so that the value of surprise should not be wasted. ⁶⁶

All these elaborate preparations were dependent upon one very important fact: that the enemy would oblige by either counter-attacking or deciding to defend a position that the EEF could assault in strength. Intelligence being received at GHQ seemed to strengthen Murray's hopes; it was reported that Turkish units in both Mesopotamia and Palestine were being 'strongly reinforced' by men from Russia or the Caucasus. ⁶⁷ Moreover, reports started to come in giving what appeared to be most reliable information that the Turks had decided to evacuate the Hejaz. ⁶⁸ If these additional troops reached the Turkish positions in Palestine then there could be little doubt that they would stand their ground. Murray's ambitions were far from outlandish in the early months of 1917, therefore.

Murray, meanwhile, did not intend to remain passive in the hope that the enemy would conform to his plans. Although he was unable to use his conventional troops to force the Turks to fight in a position

⁶⁴ War Cabinet meeting, 19 Jan. 1917, CAB 23/1.

⁶⁵ GOC in C Egypt to CIGS 22 Jan. 1917, W.O. 33/905.

⁶⁶ Lynden-Bell to GOC Eastern Force, 5 Mar. 1917, W.O. 95/4367.

⁶⁷ Murray to Robertson, 26 Feb. 1917, BM Add. MS 52462.

⁶⁸ Intelligence Summary, 5 Mar. 1917, W.O. 157/744.

of his choosing he nevertheless looked to the RFC for assistance. He ordered his aircraft to change their tactics; rather than attacking enemy camps and troops, the target was now switched to the station and the railway north of the Gaza to Beersheba line with the intention of disrupting Turkish troop movements behind the lines and so, hopefully, forcing the enemy to keep his men in position. ⁶⁹ This was imaginative use of his aerial resources by Murray, something that was not unusual with him, for he used his aircraft with some thought throughout his time in Egypt and always remained flexible. For example, with the interception of enemy air attacks almost impossible in these early days of aerial combat, Murray advocated attacks upon the enemy aerodromes, thus reversing existing policy which had been 'not bombing the enemy unless he bombs us.' ⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Lynden-Bell to GOC Middle East Brigade RFC, 9 Mar. 1917, W.O. 95/4367.

⁷⁰ Lynden-Bell to Chetwode, 18 Feb. 1917, Chetwode papers PWCI/Folder 2.

CHAPTER 12

THE FIRST BATTLE OF GAZA: 26 and 27 March 1917

'...a commander's despatches may claim a victory; the historian, reading them in a critical spirit, will ask: "If it was a victory, why was it not followed up in this way or that way?" and may thus convict the writer of concealing the truth. Or, by using the same method, he may convict of ignorance a less critical predecessor who has accepted the version of the battle given him by the same despatches.'

R.G. Collingwood

PLANNING TO SEIZE GAZA

By 21 March the railway had reached the vicinity of Khan Yunis, the pipe-line was not far behind and the local water supply was greatly improved by a nearby well. These developments meant that it was now possible for the whole of the Eastern Force to concentrate at Rafah - or even beyond. ¹ Meanwhile, enemy units had taken up positions to meet an attack at Gaza or Beersheba. ²

Murray and Dobell had hoped that the Turks would stand and fight at Sheikh Nuran so that they could be forced into a serious engagement. However, their evacuation from this position caused a 'complete change in the situation' because they could not now be reached by the British infantry, at least, not in an orthodox confrontation. ³ Consequently, the British made attempts to improve the mobility of their forces so as to increase the radius of their action; this was to be done mostly by using the Desert Column as a 'flying column' ahead of the main body. ⁴ In conjunction with these decisions came another from the C in C to continue the advance along the coast

¹ Official History, pp.279-280.

² Kress von Kressenstein, p. 506.

³ Dawnay to GOC Desert Column, 5 Mar. 1917, W.O. 95/4449.

⁴ 'Appreciation of the situation on the Eastern Front of Egypt' 9 Mar. 1917, W.O. 95/4367. Col. Fergusson to A. and N.Z. Mounted Division, 15 Mar. 1917, W.O. 95/4449. The mounted troops were instructed to travel as lightly as possible and be prepared to live off the land.

towards Gaza rather than take advantage of the tracks running inland in the direction of Beersheba which the EEF had now reached. 'I decided therefore to continue for the present a methodical advance up the coast... together with energetic preparation... for an attack in strength as soon as possible.' ⁵ Dobell wanted no delay in this move on Gaza and instructed his troops to make arrangements so that they could operate 20 miles beyond the railhead. ⁶

But one problem remained: what if the Turks decided to retire once again as they had done previously? It was to meet this eventuality that two separate strategies were developed by the EEF at the same time: the Desert Column, with two divisions in close support, was to behave as a 'powerful advance guard' and hopefully capture Gaza with little difficulty; if, on the other hand, Eastern Force's advance drew additional enemy units to the town then the final forward movement would await the further advance of the railway and in the meantime preparations were to be made 'for employing... every available source in a general engagement.' ⁷ In fact, Murray actually informed Dobell that he did not wish his troops to retire from Gaza once they had taken it and, as a result, if he was 'doubtful' as to his ability to hold the town then its occupation should be 'deferred' until it could be held in strength. ⁸ It is, therefore, misleading to give the impression that 'a cutting-out expedition' against Gaza, along the lines of those at Magdhaba and Rafah, now 'appeared' the only viable course open to Eastern Force - or, indeed, the only alternative considered. For one thing, Murray's stipulations about the occupation of Gaza show his misgivings concerning a premature dash towards that town, misgivings that were

⁵ Murray's Despatches. Fourth Despatch, 28 June 1917, p. 150.

⁶ BGGS Eastern Force to GOC Desert Column, 8 Mar. 1917, W.O. 95/4449.

⁷ 'Situation on the Eastern Front of Egypt', 15 Mar. 1917, W.O. 95/4367.

⁸ Note on C in C's O.A.S. 31, no date, W.O. 95/4367.

to prove all too prophetic! "

Nevertheless, enthusiasm for a dash to Gaza was growing amongst the C in C's subordinates. One reason for this was that the two lines of policy could - for the time being, at least - be continued in parallel and, moreover, they complemented each other; for if the Turks became aware that the British were continuing a gradual advance along the coast they might be less likely to pull their men out of Gaza in a hurry; hence a sudden descent upon the town might catch the garrison by surprise - or so it was argued. It was along these lines that Chetwode now started to reason as he considered the options open to his mounted troops. In a paper dated 15 March he laid the basic foundations of the plan that ultimately would be adopted later in the month. ¹⁰ Chetwode's suggestion became a draft plan composed by Dawnay on 17 March that seems to have been approved by GHQ almost immediately. ¹¹ However, further suggestions submitted by Chetwode caused a number of changes to be made before the final copy of the plan of battle was completed on 19 March. ¹² Chetwode, therefore, was the driving-force behind the planning of the First Battle of Gaza; Dawnay, Dobell and Murray all made use of the suggestions he made.

" Official History, p.281. The Official History simplifies the planning behind the First Battle of Gaza so that it is covered in one paragraph; but, in reality, the process was far more complex.

¹⁰ Note on Operations by Chetwode 15 Mar. 1917. Note by Chetwode to BCGS Eastern Force, no date, W.O. 95/4449. As early as 11 Mar. 1917 Chetwode had suggested a similar plan in a letter to Dawnay. See Chetwode to Dawnay 11 Mar. 1917, Chetwode papers PWCI/Folder 2.

¹¹ 'Gen. Dawnay's paper shown me on 17 Mar.' by Chetwode, 18 Mar. 1917. Lynden-Bell to Chetwode, 17 Mar. 1917, Chetwode papers PCWI/Folder 2. The Official History (p.283) incorrectly states that the plan was approved on 19 Mar.; but this was the amended version.

¹² 'Plan of Operations - Eastern Force. Proposals forwarded by Gen. Dobell under his E.S.93', 19 Mar. 1917, W.O. 95/4367.

The basis of the operation was to be the action of the mounted troops of the Desert Column. Theirs was the most dangerous task of all, for they were to be 'thrown round to the east and north-east of the town in order to block the escape of the enemy force in Gaza', while the 53rd Division attacked the vital Ali Muntar ridge south of Gaza and the 54th Division covered the flank and remained in reserve. If the Turks evacuated Gaza before the British arrived then the cavalry would seek to harass the enemy's retreat north of Gaza while the 53rd Division kept its communications secure. ¹³ The attack was set for 26 March, with the preliminary moves being made on the previous day. The Desert Column was rearranged for the operations so that it now consisted of the A. and N.Z. Mounted Division, the Imperial Mounted Division, and the 53rd Division. The remaining troops of the Eastern Force were the Imperial Camel Brigade, the 52nd and 54th Divisions, and the 229th Brigade.

Some comments must be made about this plan of action before we proceed to a description of its execution. Chetwode made it quite plain on a number of occasions that such a scheme required good intelligence; the strength of enemy troops and the very nature of the terrain around Gaza needed to be ascertained in more detail if the operation was to succeed. ¹⁴ Unfortunately, Eastern Force started to come up against very serious problems in just these areas. The only maps available for the Gaza region were those drawn up for the Palestine Exploration Fund by Lieutenant C.R. Conder and a certain H.H. Kitchener long before the war - hardly an ideal state of affairs since these maps were not even contoured! ¹⁵ Still more worrying was the paucity of reliable information as to Turkish intentions and

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Note on operations, 15 Mar. 1917, op.cit.

¹⁵ Official History, p.284. The RFC had photographed the vicinity around Gaza but it was not until the Second Battle of Gaza that a contoured map was on hand.

the strength of their forces at Gaza. Chetwode told Dawnay on 11 March that his knowledge of enemy dispositions was 'woefully vague' since deserters had stopped crossing the lines and a cordon round Gaza prevented British agents entering the town. A few days later Dawnay admitted that he no longer knew where the main Turkish concentration was.¹⁶ The vacuum of information was filled by personal assumptions, and since the Turks had already retreated before the advancing EEF on more than one occasion leaving only an isolated defensive pocket it was argued they would do so once again.¹⁷ In fact, it was believed that the enemy were semi-demoralised after their defeat in the Sinai and, more recently, because of Russian successes in the Caucasus and the British capture of Baghdad on 11 March.¹⁸ These assumptions tended to cloud the EEF's assessment of the enemy's intentions in the Gaza region. For example, when a German wireless message was intercepted revealing that Kress von Kressenstein had ordered the positions on the Gaza-Beersheba line to be strengthened, it was thought that such an order had been issued only 'to conceal from the troops that further retirement is to take place.'¹⁹ However, as the day set for the attack drew closer, more and more reports began to reach Eastern Force, and even GHQ, suggesting that the Turks would not retire from Gaza; this was certainly Murray's opinion on 24 March - a stark contrast with his subordinates' views.²⁰

Gaza itself was not likely to prove so easy a nut to crack as was thought. RFC reports after the middle of March indicated much work was being done on new

16 Chetwode to Dawnay 11 Mar. 1917 & Dawnay to Chetwode 14 Mar. 1917 Chetwode papers PWCI/Folder 2.

17 Murray to Chetwode 14 Mar. 1917, Chetwode papers PWCI/Folder 2.

18 'El-Kowkat' No.33 13 Mar. 1917, L/P&S/11/110.

19 W.D. Intelligence Section EEF 4 Mar. 1917, WO 157/713. 5 Mar. 1917, WO 95/4449.

20 Murray to Robertson 24 Mar. 1917, BM Add. MS 52462.

were
trenches in the town, which 'well laid out' with 'good use being made of hedges... to provide cover.' ²¹ The mention of hedges was most significant, for all the approaches to the town were covered by cactus hedges: these hedges were not only of great height but also very thick, so that only shelling or prolonged work with cutting tools could force a passage through them. Before these trenches and hedges to the south and south-east of Gaza lay bare slopes largely devoid of cover so that the whole position was far from being a weak one. ²² These were good reasons, therefore, for believing that the Turks would put up a stiff fight for Gaza, not an ideal prospect when the plan agreed upon assumed precisely the opposite.

But not everyone was unaware of the possible difficulties that the attack might encounter. Murray, on seeing the final version of Dobell's scheme, suggested that the 54th Division should be pushed further up in reserve so that the 53rd Division would have an improved chance of reaching its objectives since it could then concentrate solely upon these. ²³ Dobell heeded the advice of his Chief so that Chetwode was informed that 'in the event of unexpectedly strong opposition being met with' by the 53rd Division then the 54th Division should be moved forward. ²⁴ Moreover, even though the clearly-expressed intention of the operation was to seize Gaza, Dawnay, for one, foresaw the possibility that this element of the plan might not be fulfilled; on 17 March, therefore, he talked of 'tactical resources' in the event of an actual failure to take Gaza. ²⁵ There was, consequently, a subtle under-current in the minds of those who drew up this plan of battle; while it was a most ambitious scheme offering the prospect of dramatic results, it was so drawn as to

²¹ 18 Mar. 1917, W.O. 157/713. 13 & 19 Mar. 1917, W.O. 95/4449.

²² Official History, p.283.

²³ Note by C in C on GS Z/58, 20 Mar. 1917, W.O. 95/4367.

²⁴ Dawnay to GOC Desert Column 24 Mar. 1917, W.O. 95/4449.

²⁵ 'The Advance on Gaza etc.' by Dawnay, 17 Mar. 1917, Chetwode papers PWCI/Folder 2.

allow for less than a total victory if events proved not so propitious. Chetwode seemed to express this level of ambiguity when he wrote to Dawnay on 15 March:

I can't think it can come off. But when I think of the possibility of getting two Cavalry Divisions and our Infantry Division... to Gaza, before the enemy has gone north it makes me sweat with anticipation. I fear it is too good by far to come off. ²⁶

²⁶ Chetwode to Dawnay 15 Mar. 1917, Dawnay papers 69/21/2.

THE ATTACK ON GAZA: 26 AND 27 MARCH

By the end of 25 March the Eastern Force was concentrated close to the Wadi Ghazze, beyond Rafah, ready for the forthcoming battle. At 2.30 a.m. on 26 March the mounted troops set out on their march to envelop Gaza. Meanwhile, the 53rd Division - which had such a crucial role to play in the coming drama - commenced its advance to the start position at 1 a.m. after a severe march the previous day. ²⁷

General Dobell set up his Battle HQ just north of In Seirat. Chetwode also established his HQ at this place and did not move across the Wadi Ghazze as originally intended. Although the Official History explains this failure to move Desert Column's HQ as due to unforeseen delays and the rapid success of the mounted troops it seems more likely that Dobell wanted Chetwode nearby for consultation, since Chetwode was far more conversant with the plan of battle than he was. ²⁸ Finally, Murray positioned Advanced GHQ at El Arish in a railway train, in touch with Eastern Force exchange at Rafah by telegraph and telephone. Interestingly enough, Lynden-Bell had informed the War Office in January that if Dobell and Chetwode were involved in a battle together then Murray would assume command; this, however, did not occur in March and the C in C left Dobell to conduct affairs while merely observing proceedings from his train. ²⁹ Such arrangements were far from satisfactory and led to an excessive degree of leadership in a battle that was to be determined by a series of crucial decisions.

Nature now took a part in the proceedings. A dense sea fog moved inland so that by 5 a.m. on the morning of 26 March visibility

²⁷ The troops of the 53rd Division were, therefore, already tired before the battle had ever begun. This was surely an error, but was made necessary by the need for secrecy.

²⁸ Official History, p.288. Chetwode to MacMunn, 12 Jan. 1925, CAB 45/78.

²⁹ Lynden-Bell to Gen. Whigham, 9 Jan. 1917, W.O. 33/905.

was down to about 20 yards. The movement of the mounted troops could not easily be halted in spite of these conditions and the operation continued although the 53rd Division suffered because its commander, General Dallas, was unable to reconnoitre the ground over which he would attack; he therefore waited for the fog to lift while some of his men edged their way forward. This fog certainly caused confusion right at the start of the battle, as Dawnay later admitted: 'We had extraordinarily bad luck... for it opened with a thick fog... which tremendously hampered the troop movements and prevented any air reconnaissance'.³⁰ Meanwhile, thanks to good guiding and excellent sense of direction the mounted troops - concealed by the fog - had, by 10.30 a.m., enveloped Gaza and placed themselves between the Turkish formation to the east and the town itself: the stage was now set for the infantry assault.

It had been hoped to launch the 53rd Division against Ali Muntar by 10 a.m., but this never happened. The delay in the reconnaissance of the ground was more serious than it seemed since no orders for the attack were drawn up until this had been done - and, in the meantime, the 159th Brigade had been left behind, causing a further delay before it caught up with the rest of the troops. In the end, Dallas did not issue his orders until 11 a.m., with the actual attack not starting before 11.45 a.m. Chetwode, becoming anxious at the delay, tried to spur Dallas on, but this proved awkward since the GOC 53rd Division had gone over to one of his Brigade HQs. All these difficulties meant that Dallas's assault upon Ali Muntar was 'not properly synchronised, and consequently their Brigades... went in

³⁰ Dawnay Diary, 2 Apr. 1917.

piecemeal'. ³¹

In spite of these various tribulations Dallas's men did their job superbly and by 6.30 p.m. had gained their objectives. But the casualties were high, for the infantry had to cross open ground and force positions held by determined soldiers. The losses were far worse than anyone had expected and the medical services of the 53rd Division were swamped. The evacuation of the wounded proved a nightmare because much of it had to be done on the night of 26 March and transport proved to be totally insufficient, with the consequence that many of the casualties had to walk or be carried to the rear. ³² There can be little doubt that facilities collapsed under this strain in spite of claims to the contrary in the official account. ³³ In fact, the members of Advanced HQ, for example, had no idea of the scale of these losses and were shocked to learn of them. ³⁴

With the exception of these heavy losses - and they could be considered justifiable if the ultimate outcome was successful - by nightfall the battle seemed won: Gaza was surrounded completely except for its south-western side, the Turks had fallen back to the town and during the night patrols of the A. and N.Z. Mounted Division from the north met infantry of the 53rd Division in the eastern streets. Chetwode had, in fact, ordered his cavalry to attack the

³¹ 'Report on the action at Gaza on 26 Mar. 1917.' by Chetwode, 6 Apr. 1917, W.O. 95/4449. An interesting contrast is possible with the official account which says of the attack of the 53rd Division 'Its advance... was a model in precision and steadiness... a good example of British infantry tradition,' op.cit., p.301.

³² W.D. 1/2 Welsh Field Ambulance 53rd Division 26, 27 & 28 Mar. 1917, W.O. 95/4622. W.D. Assistant Director Medical Services 53rd Division 26, 27 & 28 Mar. 1917, W.O. 95/4618.

³³ Official History, p.325. The official version is that 'improved arrangements... made it possible to handle the heavy casualties.'

³⁴ James Gammell to Dawnay, 27 Oct. 1925, CAB 45/79.

town from the north and east once he became aware of the serious delay in the infantry attack. The only problem remained the advance of Turkish reinforcements to the north of Gaza which had started to pressurise the mounted troops before dark.

Dobell and Chetwode were now both concerned about the position of their mounted troops, for their horses had barely been watered during the day and enemy reinforcements were closing in. They decided that unless Gaza was taken by nightfall the cavalry would be withdrawn. By 6 p.m. (with darkness falling) Chetwode had received no news from events at Ali Muntar where, as we have seen, the position was not secured anyway until 6.30 p.m.; but reports from the mounted troops were none too encouraging, because they outlined the steady advance of enemy reinforcements. ³⁵ Chetwode now decided to pull his mounted divisions out of the battle; this was a decision that had to be taken rapidly if it was to have any effect, and it was fully supported by Dobell. ³⁶ General Chauvel's official report on the battle details the decision and the reason behind it:

At 18.10, owing to the hour and the strength and positions of the enemy forces pressing in from the North and East, and the difficulty of continuing the attack in the town of Gaza in the dark the GOC Desert Column, decided to withdraw the Mounted Troops and orders were received to break off this action after dark. ³⁷

These orders from Chetwode were not issued by Chauvel until 6.35 p.m. - but by then the mounted troops had already stopped advancing into Gaza and had actually started to collect their wounded. ³⁸

³⁵ Dawney to Maj.-Gen. MacMunn 4 Dec. 1924, CAB 45/78.

³⁶ 'Personal notes on First and Second Gaza' by Sir C. Dobell, 5 July 1917, CAB 45/78.

³⁷ 'Account of action of Anzac Mounted Division from 24 Mar. 1917 to 08.30 27 Mar.' by Chauvel, 4 Apr. 1917.

³⁸ Ibid.

There has been some debate as to what extent Chauvel protested about this order at the time. There appears to be no written evidence of any protest and the Official History actually claims that no such protest whatsoever was made to Chetwode verbally, by telephone, or messengers. ³⁹ On the other hand, Australian sources suggest that Chauvel did, in fact, object strongly to the decision - and told Chetwode over the phone. ⁴⁰ However, this kind of behaviour would appear to have been against the nature of a man like Chauvel. ⁴¹ What seems to have happened is that Chauvel did protest verbally, but, according to Dawnay, he did so too late and thus the force of his objection was greatly weakened. ⁴² Indeed, it is hard to accept that he felt very strongly about the matter at the time since he makes no mention of it in his report on the battle.

One man who did most certainly protest at these events was General Dallas of the 53rd Division. ⁴³ Chetwode had informed him that the mounted troops were withdrawing, with the result that his infantry would be exposed on their right flank and so would have to be withdrawn. It seems Dallas may have expressed himself somewhat emotionally on receiving this news in the light of the effort his men had just made, and the telephone was hardly the best medium for such an exchange of views. ⁴⁴ So strongly did Dallas feel about the matter

³⁹ Official History, p. 307.

⁴⁰ Hill, pp. 104-105. Australian Official History, p. 282.

⁴¹ Chetwode to MacMunn, 12 Jan, 1915, CAB 45/78.

⁴² Dawnay to MacMunn, 4 Dec. 1924, CAB 45/78.

⁴³ Chetwode to MacMunn, 12 Jan. 1925, CAB 45/78.

⁴⁴ Garsia, p. 76. 'A telephone is not always a satisfactory means of communication in the field. The fact that the circuit is not metallic tends to make hearing difficult. Moreover, there is little doubt that... the psychological atmosphere was not... favourable for an informative interchange of views'. This opinion may well throw additional light on the Chetwode-Chauvel protest debate.

that he issued a special order to his men after the battle:

All ranks can no doubt well understand the feelings of the GOC... when under instruction from higher authority he had to order the troops to evacuate the positions they had so bravely gained and which they were all so ready to hold at any cost. ⁴⁵

Chetwode seems to have felt some regret about this decision for he wrote to Dallas on 29 March, which prompted a more conciliatory response from the infantry general. ⁴⁶

Matters had not been helped by a misunderstanding which had arisen between Dallas and Chetwode - a misunderstanding of which neither was aware but which would prove most damaging. Chetwode told Dallas that his right must be withdrawn sufficiently to make touch with the 54th Division, but Dallas was not aware that Chetwode had ordered the 54th Division further forward. Thus the 53rd Division interpreted Chetwode's verbal order as involving a fuller withdrawal than was necessary and evacuated all the captured positions.

Meanwhile, Dobell had finally become aware of the true state of affairs - but too late. By 11 p.m. he knew for certain that Dallas had taken Ali Muntar and it seems that either at about this time or during the next few hours he learnt that, according to an intercepted enemy wireless message, the garrison of the town had been on the point of evacuating at dusk - when the mounted troops had been ordered to retire. ⁴⁷ Somewhere, something had gone wrong, because this information appears to have reached Eastern Force HQ at Rafah before 6.30 p.m., yet Dobell did not hear of it until it was of little value, as we have seen. This was a crucial failure, since

⁴⁵ Special Order by Maj.-Gen. Dallas, 29 Mar. 1917, W.O. 95/4614.

⁴⁶ Dallas to Chetwode 29 Mar. 1917, Chetwode papers PWCI/Folder 2.

⁴⁷ It is not clear precisely when Dobell received this information: the Official History (p.309) says 11 p.m. while Dawnay claimed it was not until 1 a.m., 27 Mar., and Garsia (p.77) seems to agree. See Dawnay to MacMunn, 4 Dec. 1924, CAB 45/78.

the information contained in this intercepted message would probably have prevented or at least delayed Chetwode's decision to pull out his cavalry, as Dawnay explained after the war: 'If we had had an inkling of it, it would have put a different complexion on the situation.' ⁴⁸ The precise reason for this lapse on the part of the British is not clear but it appears likely that it was caused by a collapse in communication between the different headquarters before Gaza. There is evidence that Dobell's Battle GQ found its telephonic communications with Eastern Force's permanent HQ at Rafah interrupted. Moreover, we know that Advanced GHQ at El Arish definitely passed on intercepted enemy wireless messages to Rafah; all of which tends to confirm the Official History's version that these were not passed on to In Seirat because of pressure on the line. ⁴⁹ That there was pressure on the line between Rafah and In Seirat cannot be doubted and this probably caused delays in the dissemination of information; but according to the Field Register of Eastern Force's Battle HQ 'intercepted wireless messages' were received sometime after 3.15 p.m., with one definitely logged at 6.20 p.m. ⁵⁰ This additional evidence suggests that Dobell's HQ at In Seirat did receive these vital messages at the very time when he and Chetwode were deciding to withdraw the mounted troops. If this surmise is correct then we are left with a further difficulty: why were these two generals not informed of the existence of these messages? One possibility might be that in the heat of the moment, when the whole HQ was taken up with a series of critical decisions, these messages were overlooked either by the staff or even by the generals themselves. Of course, it is possible that this information was interpreted as being incorrect or a bluff by the enemy to induce Desert Columns to over-commit its troops, with the result that its true importance was not recognised at the time.

⁴⁸ Dawnay to MacMunn 4 Dec. 1924, op.cit.

⁴⁹ Field Register, Eastern Force, G.S. (Battle HQ), 26 Mar. 1917, W.O. 95/4449.

⁵⁰ W.D. Eastern Force, G.S. (Rafah), 26-27 Mar. 1917, W.O. 95/4449.
26 Mar. 1917, Field Register, W.O. 95/4449.

Whatever the truth behind this affair the whole matter was interpreted by the EEF as a failure of good communication: 'The value of good information often depends on how quickly it can be got to the Commanders concerned.' ⁵¹

To return to the actual battle, fresh orders and new circumstances added a touch of tragedy on the following day. Chetwode, finally realising that the infantry had totally evacuated their hard-won objectives because of the misunderstanding with Dallas, now ordered him to find out if the enemy had re-taken these positions. Strong patrols were sent forward and a number of companies re-occupied Ali Muntar and Green Hill. However, enemy counter-attacks made such forward positions most precarious: just before 9 a.m. Dobell received the following news from the 53rd Division: 'Our patrols which re-occupied hills south Ali Muntar and Ali Muntar have been driven off just as reinforcements arriving.' ⁵² In truth, Dallas could not hold on. He told his Chief that the 53rd and 54th Divisions could only maintain their present positions if a counter-attack were made to drive the enemy from a position at Sheikh Abbas where he threatened Dallas's troops. Dobell now decided to withdraw the infantry from the action and he issued the necessary orders in the afternoon, the withdrawal taking place after dark and without any serious interference from the Turks. Dallas's infantry, who had given so much and ultimately to no avail, finally started to crack under the strain; it was 90° in the shade on 27 March and this, along with the troops' total exhaustion, meant that they retired in a somewhat disorderly manner, leaving a good deal of equipment behind. ⁵³ So ended the First Battle of Gaza; but for Murray, in one sense, it had only just begun.

⁵¹ G.S.Desert Column to GOC Brigades, Imperial Mounted Division, 29 Mar. 1917, W.O. 95/4549.

⁵² 27 Mar. 1917. Field Register, W.O. 95/4449.

⁵³ 'Notes on Four Despatches from Egypt, 1916-1917' by Murray, Murray papers 79/48/3. 'Report on the action at Gaza on 26 March, 1917' by Chetwode, 6 Apr. 1917, W.O. 95/4449.

THE REASONS FOR THE FAILURE

The First Battle of Gaza came so close to complete success and yet, in the end, it was a serious rebuff for the EEF. For this very reason it has excited a certain amount of attention and various explanations have been given for the ultimate failure of Murray, Dobell and Chetwode to translate their tactical successes into a strategic victory: but what were the major factors that frustrated Eastern Force on 26 and 27 March, and how do these square with the explanations given for the reverse at the time?

A great deal was made of the fog on the morning of 26 March in the contemporary reports of the battle. Murray actually attributed the entire outcome of the engagement to this natural obstacle in which, he claimed, 'everyone lost their way including Dobell in his motor car.'⁵⁴ Robertson had earlier consoled his subordinate that this was 'bad luck', but, in fact, this was far from being the full story.⁵⁵ The fog proved both a blessing and a curse to the operations of 26 March, as Chetwode readily confessed:

The very dense fog... while undoubtedly delaying the... GOC 53rd Division... at the same time gave immunity from gun fire to my troops during the time they were crossing the Wadi, and enabled the mounted troops to work forward some distance before their presence was detected.⁵⁶

And, in reality, the delay incurred by the 53rd Division may not have been much more than an hour in the end.⁵⁷

General Dallas has been the butt of much criticism. Chetwode described him as 'hopelessly inefficient' and claimed that his

⁵⁴ Murray to Robertson, 3 Apr. 1917, B.M. Add. MS 52462.

⁵⁵ Robertson to Murray, 2 Apr. 1917, Robertson papers I/14/69.

⁵⁶ 'Report on the action at Gaza on 26 Mar. 1917', by Chetwode, 6 Apr. 1917, W.O. 95/4449.

⁵⁷ Official History, p. 316.

brigadiers refused to serve under him again. ⁵⁸ There was certainly dissatisfaction amongst the EEF's upper echelons with Dallas's performance, for on 9 April Murray informed London that the general had resigned and needed a 'complete rest'. ⁵⁹ But the C in C himself deserved some of the blame for this since he had originally promoted Dallas against the choice of Robertson. ⁶⁰ Yet even if it is accepted that Dallas did make some errors on 26 March we must not overlook one important fact: his men reached all their objectives and held them securely until ordered to withdraw. It is hard not to believe, therefore, that if the battle had been a victory Dallas would have been highly commended.

There can be little doubt, as we have already seen, that the EEF underestimated both the strength and the determination of the Turkish garrison at Gaza. Dobell, for example, estimated that the town contained about 4,000 enemy troops when, in reality, it probably held at least three times that number. ⁶¹ The problem was that Kress ordered Gaza to be strengthened in the second half of March; consequently, the intelligence estimates used when the plan of battle was drawn up were out of date by the time the plan was executed. ⁶² Even so, the troops themselves were soon made aware of their miscalculation; they had been told to expect the 'meagre remains' of one 'severely mauled' division and, as a result, were given the impression that 'the whole affair would be a "cake-walk"'; therefore as the battle unfolded they became aware that something had been 'badly wrong' with the information they had been given. ⁶³ Nevertheless, by 6 p.m. on 26 March the British were poised to secure Gaza and win a decisive success; so this criticism does not fully

⁵⁸ Chetwode to MacMunn, 12 Jan. 1925, CAB 45/78.

⁵⁹ GOC in C Egypt to W.O., 9 Apr. 1917, W.O. 33/905.

⁶⁰ Robertson to Murray, 18 May 1916, and Murray to Robertson, 6 June 1916, B.M. Add. MS 52462.

⁶¹ 'Personal notes on First and Second Gaza', by Dobell 5 July 1917, CAB 45/78. Australian Official History, p.265.

⁶² Official History, p.321.

⁶³ A. Bluett, With our army in Palestine (London, 1919), p.100.

explain the failure. Nor do any possible weaknesses within the plan itself, for the very same reason - by nightfall on the first day of the attack it had delivered all that it had been designed to do; in fact, one might argue Chetwode was taken aback by the sheer scale of success simply because, before the battle, he had refused to believe such a victory could occur. A case has been made by some that the timing of the battle was all wrong; the argument is that a delay of two weeks would have allowed for more effective supply depots and a closer railhead. ⁶⁴ Murray probably would have been happier with this alternative; but it is hard to see how it could have improved matters significantly, since the enemy would surely have taken advantage of the additional time available and a totally different kind of battle would then have been fought - more along the lines of the Second Battle of Gaza.

The most significant reasons for the British rebuff at Gaza in March lie in the area of command. It was a battle that hinged upon a number of crucial decisions made by the generals concerned; and these decisions were dependent upon information received at the various HQ's and good communications with the troops in the field. In all these areas Eastern Force performed woefully. Arrangements for the direction of the battle were far from perfect; Advanced GHQ at El Arish was 'a bit of a War Office sitting on the back of a commander in the field' with no real influence upon events themselves, since it was too far in the rear and had no reserves to wield in the conflict; Dobell and Chetwode, on the other hand, were on top of each other and the GOC Desert Column must have felt cramped with his immediate superior looking over his shoulder. ⁶⁵ Such circumstances were hardly conducive to successful generalship, but, in truth, they were far worse than even this suggests. Eastern Force was dangerously short of staff officers. Dawnay described the Force as 'hopelessly understaffed' and we know that Dobell, for instance, only had three

⁶⁴ Garsia, p. 117.

⁶⁵ James Gammell to Dawnay, 27 Oct. 1925, CAB 45/79. Hill, p. 103.

staff officers himself - and two of these were sent out to ascertain what was going on at the front during the battle! ⁶⁶ The strain on these few officers must have been immense and this may explain the apparent mystery over the intercepted enemy wireless messages and the misunderstandings that seemed to plague the direction of the battle on the British side. It is possible, as well, that the added strain of an over-stretched staff intensified the air of crisis within Chetwode's headquarters as he pondered the crucial decisions of the battle. An interesting comparison can be drawn between the First Battle of Gaza and the Suvla landing at Gallipoli in August 1915, for example, the point being that at Suvla there was a freak mist, not unlike the fog at Gaza, but with more resolute leadership on the British side a significant success could have been achieved, for the enemy had been taken by surprise and took some time to recover. ⁶⁷

One has to accept that more resolute leadership was needed on 26 March. Although Chetwode's decision to pull his mounted troops out of the engagement has been described as 'technically correct' and one worthy of 'full marks' in any staff examination, given the information then available to him, he could have scored a distinction if only he had held on just a little longer! ⁶⁸ Chetwode, whose influence upon the planning of the battle had been most imaginative, even daring, revealed in the very implementation of that same plan that he perhaps 'just lacked as a commander the quality of determination and drive.' ⁶⁹

Similar criticisms can also be made of Chetwode's and Dobell's handling of the infantry assault. Murray later explained that he was

⁶⁶ Personal notes on First and Second Gaza, op.cit., and note by Dawnay, no date, CAB 45/78. Dawnay to MacMunn 4 Dec. 1924, CAB 45/78.

⁶⁷ This comparison is made more telling by the fact that the 53rd Division had been at Suvla.

⁶⁸ Wavell to Liddell Hart 8 Jan. 1926, Liddell Hart papers 1/733/1. H. Lock, With the British army in the Holyland (London, 1919), p. 39.

⁶⁹ J. Connell, Wavell: soldier and scholar, (London, no date), p. 136. Wavell served on Chetwode's staff in 1918.

displeased at the time that Dallas's forces had not been reinforced on 26 March so that his attack would have been pressed still more effectively and the positions his men captured could have been held. In fact, he felt there was far too much anxiety on Chetwode's part for the security of the 53rd Division once it had occupied Ali Muntar by the evening of 26 March. ⁷⁰ And, on 27 March the C in C considered a fresh attack should have been made: 'Sitting behind at... GHQ I felt sure Dobell ought to have thrown in the 52nd and 54th Divisions in a strong counterstroke, but he... judged that to do so... was unsound... I should have attacked.' ⁷¹ In his official despatch, however, Murray appeared to support Dobell's decision to retire, which was probably a wiser assessment of the situation, for the condition of the troops was certainly giving cause for concern by the afternoon and evening of 27 March. ⁷² The bold application of Dobell's reserves on the previous day, on the other hand, might well have changed the course of the battle. In conclusion therefore, it would probably be fair to say that while the planning for the battle was 'brilliantly conceived', the final execution of these plans left something to be desired. ⁷³

⁷⁰ Murray to Edmonds, 1 May 1925, CAB 45/79.

⁷¹ Murray to Robertson, 3 Apr. 1917, B.M. Add. MS 52462.

⁷² Murray's Despatches. Fourth Despatch 28 June 1917, p.152.

⁷³ Maj.-Gen. S.F. Mott to Director, Historical Section, 20 Feb. 1926, CAB 45/79.

MURRAY'S REPORT OF THE BATTLE

On 28 March Murray telegraphed London with the first official news of the events at Gaza. This telegram was subsequently to prove a source of embarrassment to the C in C of the EEF because its contents were somewhat misleading. For one thing, Murray made no mention of Gaza at all, but rather managed to convey the impression that his forces had become 'heavily engaged' while continuing their steady advance along the coast. However, the most significant part of the telegram was surely his description of the effect this engagement had upon the enemy: 'we inflicted very heavy losses', he claimed, and then outlined his estimation of the Turkish casualties and gave details of those captured. This, apart from a brief commendation of the behaviour of his own troops, constituted the entire telegram, which was remarkably brief, and no mention was made of any British losses.⁷⁴

At first glance it is hard to ascertain any similarity between this communication and the actual battle itself. But we need to consider the affair from Murray's perspective: his intention had always been to continue the advance across the Sinai and into Palestine steadily in the hope of bringing the Turks to battle in a serious engagement that would smash their forces; in the meantime he allowed Dobell and Chetwode to plan and execute the attack on Gaza; if it succeeded then he would be in Gaza earlier than expected, but if it did not then his policy would remain the same - to bring the Turks to battle in such a way that he could employ his full strength. His telegram was entirely consistent with this perspective on the action.

Nor should we overlook the information upon which Murray's version of events was based. We have already seen how the heavy losses

⁷⁴ GOC in C Egypt to CIGS, 28 Mar. 1917, W.O. 33/905. British losses in the battle were actually a little under 4,000 and almost entirely amongst the infantry. See Official History, p.315.

incurred by Eastern Force came as a complete surprise to Advanced GHQ and had probably not been accurately detailed by the time Murray's telegram was despatched. Moreover, the information he received from his subordinates was certainly more optimistic than one might have expected; Dobell described the battle as a 'brilliant victory' and the Desert Column's official report for 26 March stressed the casualties inflicted upon the enemy, while failing to mention its own losses. ⁷⁵ Dobell's later affirmation that 'this action could not be described as a success' lends strength to the accusation that he misled his Chief at the time in his desire to paint as positive a picture as possible of the recent battle. ⁷⁶ We know for certain, as well, that Murray visited both Dobell and Dallas at Khan Yunis on 28 March, so he must then have received full verbal descriptions of the encounter at this meeting. ⁷⁷ It is just possible that Dobell's infectious enthusiasm and confidence - for which he was well known - may have influenced Murray in the drafting of his telegram on the same day. This could explain partly why Murray's fairly negative descriptions of the battle in his diary were not reflected in the subsequent telegram. ⁷⁸ But perhaps most significant of all is the fact that Murray sent a second telegram on 28 March to the CIGS which was not nearly so sanguine. It explained that the enemy had taken up positions west of Gaza and the EEF were bringing up heavy equipment with the intention of forcing the Turks back 'by deliberate attack'. This time, moreover, casualties were mentioned somewhat ambiguously, and Robertson was assured that these were 'not out of proportion to success obtained.' This second telegram - which gave a more balanced

⁷⁵ Handwritten report on First Gaza, by Dobell, Dawnay papers 69/21/2. Desert Column to Eastforce, 27 Mar. 1917, W.O. 95/4449. This report was sent on to GHQ and seems to have formed the basis of Murray's telegram to London.

⁷⁶ Personal notes on First and Second Gaza, op.cit. Australian Official History, p.291.

⁷⁷ Murray Diary, 28 Mar. 1917.

⁷⁸ Ibid. On 26 Mar. Murray wrote: 'Attack on Gaza first day. Only fairly successful'. On 27 Mar. he commented: 'Action in neighbourhood of Gaza continued; disappointing.'

version of events - seems to have been lost amidst the uproar caused by Murray's first telegram, and some of the responsibility for this must lie with Robertson, to whom it was addressed. 79

Nevertheless, London was still left ignorant as to what had actually taken place on 26 and 27 March. The CIGS probably expected further telegrams from the Commander of the EEF and expressed some surprise that he had not heard from him again on the last day of March. 80 The CIGS therefore cabled Murray asking for more details and including a slight complaint at the paucity of the information received. 81 Murray's reply came in a very long telegram on the next day in which he gave a most detailed description of the recent operations. This time Sir Archibald estimated his own casualties, explained why his commanders had decided to pull their troops out of the conflict at the last minute, and ended with these memorable words:

The operation was most successful, and... just fell short of a complete disaster to the enemy. Our troops are exceedingly proud of themselves, particularly the 53rd Division... It is proved conclusively that in the open the enemy have no chance of success against our troops, but they are very tenacious in prepared positions. In the open our mounted troops simply do what they like with them. 82

79 GOC in C to CIGS, 28 Mar. 1917, W.O. 106/715. This second telegram was a personal one from Murray, for it bears his code (A.M. 1735). The other telegram, however, bears no such code so it may have been sent by his staff. The Official History does not mention this telegram (pp. 322-325).

80 Repington, p. 504.

81 CIGS to GOC in C Egypt, 31 Mar. 1917.

82 GOC in C Egypt to CIGS, 1 Apr. 1917, W.O. 33/905.

Robertson's request for further information had flushed further details of the battle from Murray, but even now his description remained somewhat ambiguous and encouraged optimism. ⁸³

And so the whole affair would have ended had it not been for the reaction caused by Murray's initial telegram. The CIGS was certainly impressed by it, for in a paper written for the War Cabinet on 29 March he wrote: 'On the Egyptian frontier the Turkish 4th Army was a few weeks ago thrown back into Palestine with severe losses, and has just suffered a further and still greater defeat south of Gaza.' ⁸⁴ Moreover, when Robertson told the Imperial War Cabinet of the contents of Murray's telegram its members were so excited that they ordered the CIGS to send their congratulations to Sir Archibald. ⁸⁵ On the following day the CIGS, pressed for further information by the politicians, revealed the contents of Murray's second telegram and, consequently, informed the Imperial War Cabinet that the enemy had 'fallen back to their prepared position east of Gaza, and that steps were being taken to deal with them there.' ⁸⁶ Robertson clearly believed, after Murray's first telegram, that the EEF had won a significant success and he gave this impression to the Imperial War Cabinet even though he was still very short of details and Murray's second telegram was less optimistic. One very important reason why the CIGS was so ready to abandon his usual caution was that other recent events in the Middle East all boded well for the British and seemed to presage a collapse of the Turkish war effort: Maude had defeated the Turks at Kut and taken Baghdad, the Russians were doing well in Persia, and the Grand Duke had promised to attack around Mosul, while the Turkish population was believed to be war-weary and their soldiers were deserting. ⁸⁷

⁸³ Ibid. Murray states that the Camel Corps 'nearly annihilated' a Turkish Cavalry Division, but this was simply not true and one can only assume that the GOC was badly advised.

⁸⁴ 'Addendum to note by the CIGS dated 13 Feb. 1916', by Robertson 29 Mar. 1917, CAB 24/9 G.T. 326.

⁸⁵ Imperial War Cabinet meeting, 29 Mar. 1917, CAB 23/40. The CIGS had no idea of the true nature of the battle, for he said the Turks had attacked the British 5 miles west of Gaza on 26 & 27 Mar.!

⁸⁶ Imperial War Cabinet meeting, 30 Mar. 1917, CAB 23/40.

⁸⁷ Addendum to note by the CIGS, op.cit. Robertson II, p. 168.

With the arrival of the detailed telegram of 1 April, however, the CIGS realised his mistake and the extent to which all had not been as it first appeared, as one member of the General Staff remembered: 'I shall never forget the receipt of Murray's telegram and the gradual dawn of the truth on Robertson...I don't think the delusion about a qualified victory at First Gaza lasted for long'.⁸⁸ But it had lasted long enough. Meanwhile, the CIGS had reprimanded Murray for his first telegram and explained the difficulties it had caused him: 'Your first report... gave rise to somewhat extravagant hopes, both on the part of the Government and of the general public.'⁸⁹ Murray was hurt at this response from his Chief and claimed that if he had the chance again he would 'not alter a word' of his first telegram. The friendship between Robertson and his loyal subordinate was clearly under strain - with Murray explaining that he did not like the 'insinuation' that he had lied and making the perfectly fair observation that he could not be held 'responsible... for any extravagant reading of my plain statements.'⁹⁰ He would have been far more unhappy, however, if he had read what Robertson wrote to General Monro about the whole affair: 'The truth is that in Murray's early telegrams he led us to believe that he had had a considerable victory, whereas it afterwards turned out that he had a failure.'⁹¹ It was clear, therefore, that Robertson's confidence in Murray had been dealt a fatal blow.

One reason for the CIGS's anger was that the British authorities in London had been made to look foolish when the Turkish communiqués describing the battle as a British defeat started to come to light. The British press reported the battle as a success, with the ironic result that some time later an enemy aircraft dropped the following

⁸⁸ Bartholomew to Wavell, no date, Allenby papers 6/viii/23.

⁸⁹ Robertson to Murray, 2 Apr. 1917, Robertson papers I/14/69.

⁹⁰ Murray to Robertson, 3 Apr. 1917, B.M. Add. MS 52462.

⁹¹ Robertson to Monro, 1 Aug. 1917, Monro papers MSS Eur D783/2 (b).

message over the EEF's lines: 'You beat us at communiqués, but we beat you at Gaza!' ⁹² With such divergent accounts of the conflict every kind of rumour started to circulate as to what actually had taken place at Gaza. ⁹³ Nevertheless ^{the truth was 'vigorously} 'censored' in Egypt and when information came to light that attempts were being made in England to publish Dobell's Special Order of the Day, issued after the battle, steps were immediately taken to stop this and 'prevent the recurrence of any such indiscretion in the future.' ⁹⁴

Murray's initial report of the First Battle of Gaza undoubtedly sparked off an over-enthusiastic reaction in London, and the telegram itself probably was not all it should have been. According to the Official History the affair revealed an example of a commander in the field who had 'unconsciously understated' the extent of his set-back in order to avoid needless despondency. ⁹⁵ But there are problems with the official version of these events, for there is evidence which suggests that Edmonds wished to emphasize the effect of Murray's telegram to make it an example of how commanders may exaggerate their successes or make little of their reverses, and so confuse their superior. ⁹⁶ That the C in C of the EEF could later be accused of 'one of the grossest deceptions ever practised by a military commander on his government', probably reflects more the scale of London's reaction to Murray's telegram than its actual contents. ⁹⁷

⁹² A. B. Moore, The Mounted Riflemen in Sinai and Palestine (London 1920), p. 67.

⁹³ Gen. Byng to Chetwode, 30 May, 1917, Chetwode papers PWCI/Folder 3.

⁹⁴ W.O. 95/4367, 26 June 1917.

⁹⁵ Official History, p. 320.

⁹⁶ Note by MacMunn added to letter Robertson to Edmonds, 4 Feb. 1917, CAB 45/50.

⁹⁷ Liddell Hart to Lloyd George, 25 June 1934, Liddell Hart papers I/450/File 1.

CHAPTER 13

THE SECOND BATTLE OF GAZA: APRIL 1917

'Tradition has it that Tell Ali Muntar was the hill to which Samson carried the "doors of the gate of the city" of Gaza; and it was at the foot of this hill that the British Army in the First World War lost about ten thousand men in the two unsuccessful attacks against the Turkish forces in Gaza by Sir Archibald Murray.'

Moshe Dayan

MURRAY'S INSTRUCTIONS ARE ALTERED AFTER FIRST GAZA

At the War Cabinet on 30 March 1917, Robertson suggested that the situation had now 'greatly changed' as far as Murray's forces were concerned because of the recent successes in Mesopotamia and Syria. He therefore suggested that Sir Archibald should be instructed to develop his recent successes to 'the fullest possible extent and to adopt a more offensive role in general.' ¹ The result of these suggestions was a telegram to Murray from the CIGS sent on the same day; in it Robertson outlined an alteration in the general's instructions: from now on the EEF's aim would no longer be to prepare for a major offensive in the autumn but rather to defeat the enemy units south of Jerusalem and occupy that town as soon as possible. ²

Writing about this change of policy at the end of March 1917 after the war Robertson admitted that the early reports about the battle at Gaza did influence the General Staff 'very much indeed.' Nonetheless, he also explained that this was only one of four factors that caused him to change Murray's instructions; the other factors involved were the British advances in Mesopotamia and the hope that these would draw Turkish troops away from Syria; the chance of co-operation with the Russian army which, Robertson had been promised, would advance on Mosul at the end of April; and finally - and most significantly of all - a desire on the part of the CIGS to 'please

¹ War Cabinet meeting 30 Mar. 1917, CAB 23/2.

² CIGS to GOC in C Egypt 30 Mar. 1917, Official History, p.322.

the War Cabinet as far as one could do without serious danger.' ³ These admissions are important for they demonstrate that Robertson does seem to have snatched at Murray's initial telegram on Gaza without a great deal of thought in order to strengthen his position in London at a time when the strain of war was beginning to tell. Robertson was clearly a man under strain, himself, at the end of March, and one might suggest that his decision to urge Sir Archibald forward demonstrates the degree of confidence that he had in his friend in Egypt at the end of March, for such a course of action appeared to be a safe option.

Unfortunately, Murray's response to this fresh initiative was none too enthusiastic. Although he claimed that he was keen on a rapid move towards Jerusalem he explained that this was unlikely unless he could deal the enemy another 'severe blow'; and this might be difficult because the Turks were good defensive fighters and could not be removed from their current positions 'without considerable losses' on the part of the attacking forces. These were prophetic words when one considers the events at Gaza later in April and make Murray's intentions quite plain. But what may have unsettled London even more was Murray's determination to re-state what he later called his 'never-varying' estimate of the troops required (which he had made in October 1916 and again in January 1917) if his operations were to continue. ⁴

In London this telegram was regarded as an example of a general with 'cold feet'; even Maurice Hankey, who had been friendly with Murray, later commented that the general 'dwelt at some length on the difficulties' caused by his new orders. ⁵ And Robertson's

³ Robertson to Edmonds 4 Feb. 1920, CAB 45/80.

⁴ GOC in C Egypt to CIGS 31 Mar. 1917, WO 33/905. Murray Despatches. Fourth Despatch 2 June 1917, p. 133.

⁵ Memorandum by Hankey for Lloyd George 7 Feb. 1920, Lloyd George papers F/24/2/8 (b).

immediate reply to Murray's less than encouraging communication did not give Sir Archibald much room to manoeuvre. The CIGS accepted that there might be 'severe fighting' and he was prepared 'to justify heavy casualties' since the situation was promising. *

On the afternoon of 2 April 1917 the War Cabinet discussed the future operations of the EEF and considered the various telegrams that had recently passed between the CIGS and Murray. At this most important meeting the conversation turned to the moral and political advantages to be gained from the capture of Jerusalem 'quite apart from its purely military aspects.' Since the War Cabinet's perspective was one of a morale-boosting victory in Palestine to sustain Britain's flagging population it should not surprise the reader that Murray's attitude was criticised since, it was felt, he failed to appreciate the prestige-value of such a success. Finally, the War Cabinet instructed the CIGS to inform Murray that he should seek to capture Jerusalem and give a full estimate of all his requirements so that the capture of that city could be ensured. †

Murray seems to have been stung by the implied criticism of the War Cabinet even though Robertson worded his subsequent telegram carefully. • In his official reply he defended his conduct during his 15 months in Egypt by explaining - quite rightly - that his 'sole idea' had always been to extend his railway in order to invade enemy territory and so bring the Turks to battle; that not a single day had been wasted and he now stood 110 miles from his starting-point. But this was not enough for the now obviously furious Murray and he allowed his emotions to spill over into his telegram:

Your telegram... might be read to mean that the War Cabinet considered there had been a lack in the conduct of my operations

* CIGS to GOC in C Egypt 1 Apr. 1917, W.O. 33/905.

† War Cabinet meeting 2 Apr. 1917, CAB 23/2. This meeting was preceded by one at 12 noon at which Robertson revealed the details of Murray's telegram of 1 Apr. about the battle of Gaza.

• CIGS to GOC in C Egypt 2 Apr. 1917, W.O. 106/716.

hitherto, and that I need to be spurred on. I would respectfully request that it may be reassured on this point. I feel sure that the members will forgive me if this telegram shows me to be over-sensitive, or if I have read into the wording views which were not intended. ⁹

It would seem that Murray, in such an emotional state, promised more than he could offer. Although he still pointed out that he did not have the troops he had asked for he now sounded a far more optimistic note about his further operations: 'I feel that there is a good chance of achieving considerable success with [a] properly organised attack.' ¹⁰ He even declared that he expected to be ready to attack Gaza again in 16 days; so he had fully committed himself to a second battle with the intention of defeating the Turks and advancing upon Jerusalem!

Interestingly enough Murray also sounded a similar note of optimism in his private correspondence with Robertson. Once again, he allowed his previous objections to the ambitious plans of the War Cabinet and the enthusiastic telegrams of the CIGS to be laid aside, so much so, in fact, that he told his superior 'your telegrams on the subject of the advance to the Jaffa-Jerusalem line suit me admirably.' ¹¹ It would be a little simplistic, therefore, to see these events purely in terms of the CIGS and the War Cabinet forcing an unacceptable course of action upon an unwilling general. In fact, even when Robertson telegraphed the conclusions of the War Cabinet to Sir Archibald on 2 April he added a remarkable proviso: 'Let me know at once if you are not satisfied as to this.' ¹²

⁹ GOC in C Egypt to CIGS 4 Apr. 1917, W.O. 106/716. Murray makes no mention of this telegram in his official despatch, which suggests that he may have been a little embarrassed by its contents. See Murray Despatches. Fourth Despatch 28 June 1917, p. 133.

¹⁰ GOC in C in Egypt to CIGS 4 Apr. 1917, W.O. 106/716.

¹¹ Murray to Robertson 3 Apr. 1917, B.M. Add. MS 52462.

¹² CIGS to GOC in C Egypt 2 Apr. 1917, W.O. 106/716.

On 6 April the Prime Minister sent the CIGS a note asking for information as to what steps were being taken to meet all Murray's needs.¹³ Robertson replied two days later that all was being done, but the problem was the shortage of shipping; nevertheless, he explained that the Secretary of State for War had made it a matter of personal attention and since the situation had changed because of the alteration in strategy they had both found it necessary to expedite matters.¹⁴ Murray had formed two new divisions and needed a great deal of fresh equipment as well as more rails if he was to extend his line up to and beyond Gaza. So concerned did Derby become about the shipping problem, as far as getting supplies to both Egypt and Salonica was concerned, that in April he talked of instituting an overland route via Taranto.¹⁵ But by the middle of the same month Derby informed the Prime Minister that he was encountering problems in shipping horses from America to Egypt since there simply were not enough ships to meet the needs of France and Egypt simultaneously.¹⁶

As for Murray's demand for rail, this became a long-running saga. On 2 April he informed India that unless the material promised from them arrived soon he would have exhausted all additional railway stock by the end of the month. In fact, as often happened when anything was shipped from India, one of the transports with the equipment needed had been delayed by plague.¹⁷ Meanwhile, the Indian authorities were informed by London that Egypt's demands for railway materials should take priority over those of IEF Force D in Mesopotamia, the latter force having to make do with smaller rails.¹⁸ One

¹³ Note by Lloyd George to CIGS 6 Apr. 1917, Lloyd George papers F/44/3/11.

¹⁴ Robertson to Lloyd George 8 Apr. 1917, Robertson papers I/19/12.

¹⁵ Derby to Haig 3 Apr. 1917, Derby papers.

¹⁶ Derby to Lloyd George 17 Apr. 1917, Lloyd George papers F/14/4/37.

¹⁷ GOC EEF to C in C India 2 Apr. 1917 and C in C India to GOC EEF 3 Apr. 1917, L/MIL/17/5/3916.

¹⁸ W.O. London to C in C India 7 Apr. 1917, L/MIL/17/5/3916.

problem for Murray was that any equipment assigned to his force from England might be diverted to France; for example, on 16 April Robertson had to explain to the War Cabinet why 30 miles of rail promised to the EEF had actually been sent to the Western Front! ¹⁹ Finally, however, the War Office admitted that India was the only source of track available for Egypt since the entire output of England was needed for France, with the inevitable result that still greater pressure was placed upon India. ²⁰

Meanwhile other arguments had been raised in London that seemed to strengthen still further the need for an early advance by Murray. Ormsby-Gore wrote a long memorandum which he subsequently passed on to Hankey early in April; in it he argued that Murray's target ought to be Damascus, not Jerusalem, and that the EEF should seek to have moved beyond the western plain of Palestine before the malaria season of the summer caused a very high sickness rate amongst the troops. Consequently he wanted the EEF to use its mobile troops to the maximum extent and move inland to snatch Damascus, as well as Jerusalem, by autumn. Although this was a very optimistic outline of future operations it nevertheless impressed Hankey who described it as 'really good stuff', and he sent it on to Robertson. ²¹ Such ideas gained a wider audience as Hankey adopted them in the revised version of his 9 December 1916 memorandum which he produced on 18 April:

the climate of the coast of Palestine and Syria in summer is abominable... and if the hill country is not reached before July it might be unwise to commit further forces to this theatre before the autumn. ²²

¹⁹ War Cabinet meeting 16 Apr. 1917, CAB/23/2.

²⁰ W.O. London to C in C India 17 Apr. 1917, L/MIL/17/5/3916.

²¹ 'Palestine. Geographical and Political' by Ormsby-Gore 1 Apr. 1917. Ormsby-Gore to Hankey 6 Apr. 1917. Hankey to Robertson 10 Apr. 1917, CAB 21/15.

²² Memorandum on War by Hankey 18 Apr. 1917, CAB 63/20.

THE EEF PREPARES FOR A SECOND ATTACK ON GAZA

Although the recent battle at Gaza had not achieved complete success there were still those in Egypt who regarded it as an achievement worthy of mention. Dawnay actually described it as a 'great success' because it had forced the Turk to concentrate his forces so that in future 'he will have to fight and be beaten'. ²³ This enthusiasm for a second engagement was shared by Wingate; writing on 9 April he explained that Murray would soon defeat the enemy and, consequently, the earlier battle 'will have proved a blessing in disguise' since it had drawn the Turkish forces into a fixed position when they could be assaulted. ²⁴

There was no doubt that the Turks had begun to concentrate. Before the first battle Gaza had merely been an outpost held by a strong enemy unit; now it soon became the strongest position in an entrenched line that covered terrain from the sea and along the road towards Beersheba as far as a position at Abu Hureira. In the lull that followed the earlier battle the Turks constructed fresh defensive works and, while a continuous line was not attempted, the various positions were, nevertheless, well chosen. In one sense the Official History is quite correct in stating that the problem now facing Murray had 'changed completely'; but there is also a sense in which this apparently simple statement completely misses the point. ²⁵ In fact it probably would be more accurate to declare that the problem now facing the C in C had reverted to the one for which he had been planning since January. This, of course, helps to explain the enthusiasm and optimism of the two contemporaries whom we have just quoted. The initial clash at Gaza had been a spur of the moment affair as far as GHQ was concerned - a rude interruption to their long-term plan of crushing the Turkish forces in a full-scale, modern

²³ Dawnay Diary 2 Apr. 1917.

²⁴ Wingate to Strachy 9 Apr. 1917, Wingate papers 145/4/90.

²⁵ Official History, p. 326.

battle in which the EEF's superiority in modern equipment would make all the difference. GHQ was not caught off guard by the problem that now faced them, but rather by the urgency that was forced upon them from London.

The EEF now began to prepare for its next battle. The first step was to extend the railway so that the full force could be employed; by 5 April it had reached Deir el Balah where the H Q of the Eastern Force was positioned. Since the railhead was now closer to the front line it became possible to bring forward more heavy artillery: more, at least, than had been available at the end of March, but not enough for the task that lay ahead. As early as 30 March Murray had foreseen this eventuality and had pleaded with the War Office for more ammunition for his heavy guns in time for a second battle. On the next day he again asked for help; this time he requested ten of the most modern RFC planes to combat the enemy's use of German aircraft which outclassed his own. ²⁶

With the major preparations complete attention turned to how best to deliver a knock-out blow to the Turkish forces. Now, if the Official History is to be believed, the planning and indeed the entire episode which has become known as 'Second Gaza' 'needs no comment' and 'has none of the interest' of the previous battle. ²⁷ But this is unfair, for the planning phase of this battle is absolutely fascinating and contains much that was both imaginative and thought-provoking.

General Dobell had produced a plan for the ensuing engagement on 3 April. His conception was for a battle in two stages: first, a general advance would be made to a position two or three miles beyond

²⁶ GOC in C Egypt to W.O. 30 Mar. 1917. GOC in C Egypt to W.O. 31 Mar. 1917, W.O. 33/905. Murray did not get any new aircraft until after the second battle of Gaza even though his telegram explained that they were 'essential to the success of my future operations.'

²⁷ Official History, p. 348.

the Wadi Ghazze from which the final attack could be launched; next, after a pause to bring up the artillery and a heavy barrage had been laid down, a frontal assault was to be commenced by three infantry divisions with two of these being assigned the enemy position at Ali Muntar 'on the same general lines as the attack of the 53rd Division on 26 March', while the third was to move through the sand-dunes on the coastal side of Gaza. As for the EEF's much-vaunted mounted troops of the Desert Column, they were to cover the right flank of the infantry against any Turkish advance from positions at Atawine and Abu Hureira on the Gaza-Beersheba road. ²⁸

This was the basis of the plan; but of far greater interest were the various stratagems and points of detail which, it was hoped, would make a frontal attack successful at Gaza. Dobell hoped to use gas and was optimistic about its effects; he believed it would cause a 'consequent depression of... morale' amongst the Turks. ²⁹ This mention of gas caused Murray some consternation, for he feared that Dobell's desire to use such means actually revealed uncertainty on his part as to whether he really could defeat the enemy. Dobell was horrified and sought to reassure his chief that his intention had been only to ensure that the final stage of the operation was concluded in a single day, and that he had every confidence in the strength of his force. ³⁰ However, the subject of gas continued to permeate the planning procedure as the full implications of its use were considered. Dawnay suggested that it might be used from the air while Murray - although he seemed none too enthusiastic over its use and according to some believed its use was 'inhuman' - sanctioned its employment in the form of gas shells in order to combat additional Turkish reinforcements. ³¹ One problem concerning any recourse to

²⁸ E.S. 125 by Dobell 3 Apr. 1917, W.O. 95/4450.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Dobell to CGS, GHQ 7 Apr. 1917, W.O. 95/4450. This would seem to substantiate the charge that Murray was taken in by Dobell's 'boundless confidence'. See Australian Official History, p. 300.

³¹ Notes on smoke clouds and gas by Dawnay 3 Apr. 1917, Dawnay papers 69/12/2. McPherson letter CXI 20 Apr. 1917, McPherson papers 80/25/1.

gas was, naturally, the reaction of the enemy and this seems to have caused the EEF some anxiety. According to intelligence received the Turks would employ gas as a reprisal for any 'first use' by the British and attention was consequently given to gas helmets since the Germans had developed a new gas shell. ³²

It was also hoped to create a smoke cloud to 'drift across the attack' by the utilisation of smoke candles. Such a cloud, it was felt, would not only reduce casualties amongst the assaulting force, but it might also have a detrimental effect upon Turkish morale since the smoke could easily be mistaken for more gas. ³³

Dobell opted for the use of tanks in his original plan because the terrain was thought to be suitable - and his own men had a good look at it at the end of March. While no changes were to be made in the general plan in order to suit the tanks some serious thought was given to their employment; they were to be used in pairs, to clear lanes through the notorious cactus hedges and - by their very presence - to draw enemy fire away from the advancing infantry. ³⁴ The tanks, gas and smoke were all regarded as 'accessories' to the standard equipment available to Eastern Force; but this is not to say that much was not expected of them, for great stress was laid upon the need to keep their existence secret until the final phase of the battle so that they might achieve 'some measure of surprise' over the enemy. ³⁵

Also of note amidst the numerous plans laid for the coming conflict were the special arrangements developed in order to improve communications between the British forces after the dreadful showing

³² Daily Intelligence Summary 14 Apr. 1917, W.O. 157/798. Capt. Kavanagh to 3rd Australian L.H. Brigade 23 Apr. 1917, W.O. 95/4549.

³³ Smoke clouds and gas, op.cit. and Use of Smoke, no date, by Dawnay, Dawnay papers 69/12/2.

³⁴ 'Special Instructions: - Tanks', no date, by Dawnay, Dawnay papers 69/12/2.

³⁵ Dawnay to GOC 52nd Division 12 Apr. 1917, Dawnay papers 69/12/2.

in this area during the previous battle; the aim was to ensure 'the rapid and constant transmission of information to Headquarters... while operations are in progress'. ⁹⁶ Dobell's command had learnt vital lessons from the events of 26 March, therefore, in the heat of battle that they were determined not to forget.

Meanwhile, as more definite intelligence concerning the Turkish positions began to come in, Dobell started to consider making changes to his scheme and introduced a degree of flexibility into the planning process that had not previously been present (at least as far as the final phase was concerned), for he now allowed for the possibility of a response to enemy troop movements around the Hureira and Atawine areas. ⁹⁷ Such flexibility was necessary not only because of enemy dispositions, but also due to a very real debate going on within the EEF as to the best means of taking Gaza. At an important Eastern Force conference held on 11 April the various options were considered. ⁹⁸ The first alternative was to attack the Turkish line in depth along the coast; this had been suggested by General Smith of the 52nd Division who, along with three of his brigadiers, was not at all optimistic about Dobell's plan. ⁹⁹ A second possibility was a far more ambitious attack involving a wider enveloping movement to the right of Gaza. This line of thinking developed into Dawnay's famous Gaza-Beersheba appreciation that was used as the basis for Allenby's triumphant capture of both towns in November; in fact, Dawnay had actually begun work upon this very paper in the second week of April. ⁴⁰ The intention was to take Gaza not by direct assault but rather

⁹⁶ 'Liaison service', no date, by Dawnay, Dawnay papers 69/12/2.

⁹⁷ Situation - 10 Apr. 1917, Dawnay papers 69/12/2. Official History, p.331.

⁹⁸ Conference, 11 Apr. 1917, Dawnay papers 69/12/2.

⁹⁹ A.H. Leggett to Director, Historial Section 26 Nov. 1925, CAB 45/79. Official History, p.330. This is the only mention of what was a serious alternative and would be raised again when Allenby took over. See Garsia, p.212.

⁴⁰ Dawnay to Wavell 29 Dec. 1938, Allenby papers 6/VIII/35.

by piercing the Turkish line at Beersheba, where it was much weaker, and so outflank Gaza.

A second conference took place on 16 April at Khan Yunis and was attended by Dobell and the divisional commanders, with Murray and GHQ presiding. ⁴¹ According to Dawnay, Dobell did actually raise the Beersheba operation at this meeting as a serious substitute because, although it needed a larger force and more time, it did offer greater advantages. Unfortunately, the C in C would have none of it since such a project needed at least six more weeks, which was too long because 'the urgency of Whitehall weighed strongly with him', and in so saying he showed a telegram to Dobell from Robertson. ⁴² Dobell's plan remained intact, therefore, in spite of fierce opposition towards it from many of his subordinates, above all because it was 'at least straightforward... although it may require hard hitting.' ⁴³

These facts require some comment before we continue with the narrative. Firstly, they prove beyond all doubt that Murray felt constrained by London to attack at the earliest possible date, and that this urgency made Dobell's original plan the most attractive of all the available alternatives largely because it could be executed rapidly. It was this fact more than any other which prevented an early development of the Beersheba scheme and not, as the Official History claims, solely a lack of resources and problems of water supply. ⁴⁴ Secondly, the traditional version of the second battle of Gaza, that it involved the creation and execution of an unimaginative plan, is not correct, for even the plan finally adopted was not totally unimaginative, nor was it simply accepted without fuss, but rather only after a fierce internal debate within the EEF.

⁴¹ Murray Diary 16 Apr. 1917.

⁴² Notes by Dawnay 20 Dec. 1924, CAB 45/78.

⁴³ Conference, 11 Apr. 1917, op.cit.

⁴⁴ Official History, p.329. Clearly the Official History tries to play down the failures in British strategy at the highest levels which caused these events, for it makes no mention of any idea of urgency in the planning.

Interestingly enough, the attitude of the leading actor in this drama was ambiguous. Murray was clearly under a great deal of stress; he felt the pressure from his superiors in London, and no doubt could not forget the error he had made in his initial report upon the first clash at Gaza, while he was also suffering from the added tension caused by the death of his mother on 3 April.⁴⁵ In a letter to Wingate of 14 April we get some idea of his own impressions of Dobell's plan and the prospects which awaited its execution:

We shall do our best to defeat the Turks during the next week or so but it will not be a rapid business and is very difficult... We may not take Gaza... but in that case we hope to establish ourselves in close contact and must try to wear the Turks down.
46

These are surely the words of a man resigned to making the best of a bad job and compare most unfavourably with the comments he was making to Robertson and the War Cabinet at the same time.

On the other hand, it certainly was not true that the plan of battle 'met with approval nowhere'.⁴⁷ Confidence did remain high amongst Murray's subordinates about the coming conflict in spite of any disputes over the plan of action. Chetwode, for example, could write to Murray on 9 April: 'I am very hopeful of big results... our deliberate preparations... should make the matter very safe.' In the same letter the commander of the Desert Column also pronounced himself satisfied with all of Dobell's plan of action apart from the role assigned to his own troops.⁴⁸ Such statements made before the battle stand in stark contrast to those he made after the war. For example, in 1939 he told Wavell that he 'objected to the second battle

⁴⁵ Murray Diary 3 Apr. 1917. Murray did not actually hear of her death until 4 Apr.

⁴⁶ Murray to Wingate 14 Apr. 1917, Wingate papers 145/4/113.

⁴⁷ Garsia, p. 145. Chetwode papers PWCI/Folder 2.

⁴⁸ Chetwode to Murray 9 Apr. 1917, {

taking place at all because I knew it was impossible to win it' and in 1940 he went into print with the following: 'The Second Battle I had nothing to do with except to object to its taking place at all.' ⁴⁹ Chetwode stands condemned of seeking to avoid any connection with what became a disastrous failure; but his example is by no means unique and is cited here to show how careful one must be of statements made after the event, especially one as brutal as the second Battle of Gaza. There is also evidence to suggest that Dawnay may have been guilty of 'distancing' himself from the planning of the battle because on 16 April, the very day of the conference at Khan Yunis, he made the following comment in his diary:

This has been a wonderfully interesting time - and, if things go well, I have great hopes. What has been done has been closely reviewed by GHQ, and I must say I was very pleased to be told that it was good. ⁵⁰

Of course, such a statement also fully implicates GHQ; and this is a point which Dobell made forcefully after his subsequent dismissal. He argued that since his Chief approved his plan 'in detail' then, in reality, Murray's responsibility for the events of the Second Battle of Gaza was greater than it had been for the earlier battle; and conversely, therefore, Dobell could say with some justification of the subsequent débâcle: 'I do not consider my responsibility to be so complete.' ⁵¹ In truth, nearly everyone had a hand in the battle both at GHQ and at Eastern Force HQ; but some would, by fortune or by later successes, avoid the taint of involvement in this defeat, while others would never be able to remove it.

A certain degree of over-confidence did pervade the EEF at this time and was caused by two factors. One was undoubtedly the string of victories that the EEF had enjoyed over the Turks which culminated in the near victory at Gaza in March. The Turks seemed to be on the

⁴⁹ Chetwode to Wavell 17 Feb. 1939, Allenby papers 6/VIII/31. Garsia, p. ix.

⁵⁰ Dawnay diary 16 Apr. 1917.

⁵¹ Personal notes on First and Second Gaza, op. cit.

run and if one division and a single brigade could do so much in a lightning strike then surely a force of four divisions would achieve much more in^a carefully-prepared assault, or so many in the EEF seemed to reason. ⁵²

The second reason was a good deal more subtle and had to do with a complete failure correctly to evaluate the qualities of the Ottoman infantryman. As one reads the various plans and memoranda one becomes aware of the emphasis that everyone laid upon the damage that could be done to enemy morale. For instance, when considering the role of the tanks the following assumption was made: 'it is anticipated that the use of these engines will come as a surprise to the enemy, commanders should bear in mind the moral effect of their appearance.' ⁵³ Similar statements were made concerning the use of gas, smoke and heavy artillery, with the result that one cannot help but feel that Eastern Force HQ regarded the Turks as about akin to a native force unable to face a modern army. If this sounds somewhat unlikely it should be remembered that Dobell had only recently been in action against the Senussi - exactly this type of enemy; moreover, Lynden-Bell, obviously concerned at Dobell's lack of experience of facing a more resilient enemy, instructed the commander of the Eastern Force to consult Chetwode fully, because he had recently been on the Western Front in France. ⁵⁴

⁵² Chetwode to Murray 9 Apr. 1917, Chetwode papers PWCI/Folder 2.

⁵³ 'Special Instructions: - Tanks', op. cit.

⁵⁴ Lynden-Bell to Chetwode 2 Apr. 1917, Chetwode papers PWCI/Folder 2.

THE EVENTS OF 17-21 APRIL 1917

The second battle of Gaza commenced on 17 April, although the preliminary movements had actually begun on the previous evening. Elaborate preparations were made to deceive the enemy so that they would not be alarmed by any initial occupation of forward positions before it was too late.⁵⁵ In fact the first phase of the battle was an unqualified success so that the Eastern Force could report: 'all going well, all quiet'.⁵⁶ All positions were reached with the minimum of casualties and on 18 April Robertson informed the War Cabinet that 'the attack had commenced successfully, and... General Murray's army was now about two miles from Gaza.'⁵⁷

There now followed the pause deemed necessary before the final assault began. Final preparations were made for the attack: troops got into position, ammunition was brought forward and the enemy were bombarded. Meanwhile, permission was given by Eastern Force HQ to use gas shells against selected targets.⁵⁸ Murray's impression of 18 April was one of continuous bombardment by his army before the next, and most important, phase of the battle commenced.⁵⁹

The passive attitude of the enemy to the initial British advance meant that Dobell could discard the 'second thought' he had had about his original plan after the reports of 10 April; consequently the main assault was now to be as he had always intended it; the attack would be from Mansura and Sheikh Abbas, with the aim being to

⁵⁵ 'Report of Operations 16-20 Apr. 1917; 5 May 1917 by Major-General Smith, W.O. 95/4450.

⁵⁶ 'East Force Operations in the Vicinity of Gaza 17-20 Apr.', W.O. 95/4450.

⁵⁷ War Cabinet meeting 18 Apr. 1917, CAB 23/2.

⁵⁸ 'East Force Operations in the Vicinity of Gaza', op.cit. HQ made it clear that any target bombarded by gas shells was not to be shelled with normal ammunition; thus, when gas shells proved ineffectual this very policy may well have contributed to the failure of the British attack.

⁵⁹ Murray diary 18 Apr. 1917.

capture Ali Muntar and wheel left on Gaza. ⁶⁰

Even before the attack was made, however, the proposed artillery bombardment had come up against problems. Visibility was poor early on 19 April, the effect of the gas shells could not be observed and low clouds meant that any co-operation with the aircraft was seriously hindered. ⁶¹ Indeed, it soon became abundantly clear that the artillery had not silenced the enemy guns, for as the men of the 52nd, 53rd and 54th Divisions moved forward they soon came under fire. So deadly was the Turkish fire that the EEF infantry lost heavily and those units which did reach enemy positions were so depleted that they could not withstand the inevitable counter-attacks. Moreover, heavy losses, isolated units in advanced positions and the general chaos created in any major engagement caused confusion so that the requested artillery support did not materialise and forward positions failed to be consolidated. ⁶² It was clear that 19 April was rapidly becoming a 'black day' for the EEF; but this ought not to blind us to the fact that there was some chance of success that day. The vital positions of Ali Muntar, Middlesex Hill and Green Hill were all within a small area so that if they could have been subjected to a sufficiently intense bombardment then 'it is quite possible that they would have been captured by the 52nd Division, which would then... have been in a position dominating Gaza.' ⁶³ But no such bombardment was possible - and the chance was lost. Murray, sitting at his advanced HQ at Khan Yunis, was very disappointed and confided to his diary: 'Attack... gained 1,000 to 2,000 yards, not as much as I should have liked.' ⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Official History pp.334-335. Even at this, the last minute, Dobell allowed for a degree of flexibility in his plan.

⁶¹ W.D. 53rd Division 19 Apr. 1917, WO 95/4614. 'East Force Operations in the Vicinity of Gaza', op.cit. 'Operations carried out by East force Heavy Artillery Group between 17 and 20 Apr. 1917', WO 95/4451.

⁶² 'Report of Operations 16-20 Apr. 1917', op.cit.

⁶³ Official History, p.341. The description of 19 Apr. as 'that black day' comes from the Official History (p.338) and is doubly significant since this work tends to avoid such emotive language.

⁶⁴ Murray diary 19 Apr. 1917.

With the initial attack having failed the question now arose as to what should be done next. Murray wanted the attack resumed at dawn the next day and Lynden-Bell informed Dawnay of this over the phone. However, Dobell, having discovered that all his subordinate commanders were opposed to renewal of the attack, decided to rescind the order to attack, a decision for which he did not receive sanction from Murray until after it was made but which undoubtedly was the bravest decision he made that day for it prevented further carnage. ⁶⁵ That Murray was not entirely satisfied with this development became clear when he summoned Dobell to Khan Yunis on 20 April and explained to him that he was still anxious for the attack to be resumed shortly. ⁶⁶ Events, however, had turned against the EEF's commander for his forces had now switched to the defensive in order to frustrate an expected Turkish counter-attack which intercepted enemy wireless messages seemed to reveal was on the way. ⁶⁷ Murray did hold out some hope of gaining a victory by crushing this Turkish attack; but even this slim possibility was denied him since the enemy never attempted a major assault. ⁶⁸ Although Murray maintained in his communications with London that he still intended to attack as late as 22 April in reality this was becoming less and less a possibility since intelligence sources informed him: 'there are indications from several sources that the Turks... have decided to try by every means to stop our further advance... a stream of reinforcements is being diverted into Syria.' ⁶⁹ The battle was over and on 23 April Robertson admitted to the War Cabinet that the EEF 'had not achieved success.' ⁷⁰

⁶⁵ Notes by Dawnay 20 Dec. 1924, CAB 45/78.

⁶⁶ 'Personal Notes on First and Second Gaza', op. cit. The Official History makes no mention of this important meeting.

⁶⁷ Chatwode to Chauvel 20 Apr. 1917, WO 95/4450.

⁶⁸ GOC in C Egypt to CIGS 20 Apr. 1917, WO 33/905.

⁶⁹ GOC in C Egypt to CIGS 22 Apr. 1917, WO 106/716. Intelligence

⁷⁰ War Cabinet meeting 23 Apr. 1917, CAB 23/2.

Summary No. 153 22 Apr.
1917, WO 157/714.

THE CAUSES OF THE DEFEAT AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

Perhaps the biggest single cause contributing to the second defeat at Gaza was the sheer strength of the Turkish position. In their strong point on Ali Muntar the Turks could actually lay their guns with open sights on to the British positions. ⁷¹ Then, of course, the cactus hedges, which had proved such an obstacle in March, still remained to be overcome. These natural advantages had been wisely exploited by the enemy by the intelligent positioning of machine-guns; indeed, information received by the EEF had warned them that the Turks had been increasing the number of machine-guns in their force since the end of March so that it was admitted that the enemy army at Gaza had more such guns 'than any Turkish force with which we have hitherto been in contact.' ⁷² The Ottoman infantry had worked hard digging trenches around the town and these, too, added strength to a redoubtable defence. ⁷³ The Turks seem to have handled their artillery with some skill also and had certain advantages over that of the Eastern Force since it was often directed by Arab spies who moved amongst the British camps. ⁷⁴ All of these factors combined to create a formidable defensive system, and it is hardly surprising that the assaulting British infantry were often confounded in spite of their great gallantry;

owing to the intense concentration of the enemy's artillery and machine gun fire and the extremely difficult nature of the ground, affording... concealed protection and immunity from shell fire to innumerable rifle men and machine guns, a further advance was practically impossible. ⁷⁵

Finally, the enemy succeeded, to a certain extent, in anticipating the various movements of the Eastern Force's infantry with the consequence

⁷¹ R.M. Goodsall, Palestine Memories (Cantebury, 1925), pp. 13-14.

⁷² Intelligence Summary No. 177 19 May 1917 and No. 181 24 May 1917, WO 157/715.

⁷³ W.D. Eastern Force 7, 8 and 9 Apr. 1917, WO 95/4450.

⁷⁴ Australian Official History, p. 325. Bluet, pp. 131-134.

⁷⁵ 'Report of Operations 16-20 April 1917', op. cit.

that the divisional commanders found their task that much harder. ⁷⁶ Nor were the Turks short of men; although estimates vary as to their exact numbers at Gaza in April, it seems they had at least 18,185 rifles alone for the battle and this may have risen to 25,500 by 22 April. ⁷⁷

If the Turkish forces conducted a skillful defence and made the most of their many advantages then the EEF made a number of blunders. For one thing, Dobell's plan was open to a certain degree of criticism and contained inherent weaknesses. It has been called 'a culpably stupid affair' because the troops were forced to attack on too narrow a front at the enemy's strongest point, although such criticism ought to be tempered by Dobell's own admission of these very failings since they were partially forced upon him by lack of water. ⁷⁸ Moreover, even though the plan talked of creating a gap through which the mounted troops might pass in order to exploit any success this was never a real possibility, since the objective was clearly stated as the town of Gaza, nothing more and nothing less. ⁷⁹ But the most significant failing of Dobell's scheme was the pause it demanded between the two phases of the attack, and its reliance upon artillery. The British did achieve a certain degree of surprise during the first phase of their advance, but all surprise was surrendered for the final onslaught. ⁸⁰ As for the preliminary bombardment before the main

⁷⁶ 'The following brief account of the operations of this Force between 16th and 20th instant is published for information, by HQ 52nd Division, WO 95/4597.

⁷⁷ Official History, p. 349. Intelligence Summary No. 153 22 Apr. 1917, WO 157/714.

⁷⁸ Liddell Hart to Lloyd George 25 June 1934, Liddell Hart papers 1/450/file 1. 'Personal Notes on First and Second Gaza', op. cit.

⁷⁹ Garsia, p. 146. Garsia goes into great detail as to the failings of Dobell's plan and the whole of the EEF's command system. He argues that one major failure was the lack of any real appreciation (p. 144); but as we have seen such an appreciation considering the various alternatives was drawn up, the trouble being that this was only done after Dobell's plan had already been accepted.

⁸⁰ Marginal notes by Major-General S. F. Mott, no date, CAB 45/79.

attack, there were those amongst Dobell's subordinates who considered it the 'most futile thing possible' since it merely served to warn the enemy of an imminent advance. ❶

The British also made a number of errors during the battle itself. Dawnay certainly believed that the 52nd and 53rd Divisions were 'extremely feebly handled' by their commanders, a fact which may not seem so surprising if one remembers that one of these officers was the very same General Smith who had criticised Dobell's plan and suggested an attack on the coastal side of Gaza. ❷ Murray surely agreed and commented later: 'the tactical handling was not all that could be desired'. ❸ Mistakes were certainly made with the gas shells; they were fired at the enemy trenches far too soon so that their content evaporated before the Turkish troops moved their positions. ❹ In fact, the whole matter turned out to be something of a farce; since the gas 'had no more effect in that atmosphere than squibs' the Turks never realised it had been used, and, of course, the EEF was hardly going to tell them! So well was the whole matter kept quiet that even the British forces in Mesopotamia were not sure if gas had actually been used. ❺ Some complaints were also made about the use of the tanks which achieved little in the battle, since it was considered they ought to have been used in a single concentration rather than in pairs. ❻

❶ Major-General Smith to Director, Historical Branch 27 Nov. 1917, CAB 45/80.

❷ 'Personal Notes on First and Second Gaza', op. cit. Marginal comment by Dawnay.

❸ Notes on Four Despatches from Egypt 1916-1917, op. cit.

❹ Chaytor to Director, Historical Branch 26 Oct. 1925, CAB 45/78.

❺ Murray to Edmonds 1 May 1925, CAB 45/79. 'Defensive Measures Against Poison Gases 4 May 1917 - 8 Oct. 1917' by GHQ, IEF'D', WO 158/659.

❻ Australian Official History, p. 307.

Eastern Force also laboured under a number of disadvantages for which they could not be considered responsible. Dobell most assuredly suffered from a lack of troops, a fact which Murray was only too ready to declare himself whenever he considered the reasons for his second failure at Gaza: 'If the five divisions repeatedly stated to be necessary had been there Gaza would have fallen.' ⁸⁷ We have already made mention of the woeful performance of the British artillery during the battle. The major reason for this was, not so much any failure on the part of the gunners, but rather the result of the basic deficiency of guns amongst Eastern Force. For example, the 54th Division had ^{only} 8x5 inch howitzers and 15x18 pounders. ⁸⁸ To a certain extent, however, the British only had themselves to blame for this state of affairs, for in February Dobell had sanctioned the formation of new units in the following fateful terms:

In this theatre... the enemy is not equipped with a powerful artillery, and in existing circumstances I would therefore feel disposed to recommend the formation of divisions with the minimum of artillery recommended. ⁸⁹

On the other hand, shortage of guns was not the only problem for the artillery; ammunition also ran short, and often during crucial stages of the battle. ⁹⁰

⁸⁷ 'Notes on Four Despatches from Egypt 1916-1917', op. cit. The 52nd, 53rd and 54th Divisions were, on average, 1,500 below establishment before the battle. Official History, p. 328.

⁸⁸ Notes by Major-General Hare 9 Nov. 1925, CAB 45/79.

⁸⁹ Dobell to CGS, GHQ 20 Feb. 1917, WO 95/4449.

⁹⁰ Official History, p. 341.

The immediate effect of this second defeat of the EEF was upon the troops themselves. Eastern Force lost up to 6,000 men in the battle for no appreciable gain whatsoever; in fact, one brigade had lost 30% of its men by the conclusion of the first day of the battle alone. ⁹¹ These losses caused the British troops much anxiety, for the lifeless bodies of their friends lay where they had fallen for at least six months as 'a gruesome spectacle'. ⁹² There was no way in which the scale of the defeat could be hidden from the common soldier as a result, for he saw the bodies of his comrades on the battlefield and could not avoid noticing the continuous dressing and evacuation of the wounded by the Field Ambulances which went on until mid-day on 20 April. ⁹³ They realised, how could they not, that this battle had been 'the biggest setback' for the EEF so far. ⁹⁴ It is hardly surprising, therefore, that a degree of bitterness arose amongst the ranks in the light of this apparently useless slaughter and in consequence of the great measure of confidence they had been fed by their officers before the battle. ⁹⁵ This resentment was hardly improved by the various descriptions of the battle in the British press which called it a 'minor engagement', or even a British victory, and concealed the true nature of the defeat. ⁹⁶ Even the Turks were surprised at the inaccuracy of the British reports. ⁹⁷ In fact, the C in C was not above releasing descriptions of the battle that were somewhat misleading; for example, on 20 April he told Robertson that he was

⁹¹ Official History, p. 348. It is of interest that the Official History actually gives a higher estimate of the losses than the contemporary documents; for example, it gives the 52nd Division's losses as 1,874 whereas the Division's own diary gives a figure of 1,368 (excluding officers). See WO 95/4597 21 Apr. 1917. The 155th Brigade of the 52nd Division suffered 30% casualties.

⁹² Lock, p. 41.

⁹³ W.D. 53rd Division 1/2nd Welsh Field Ambulance 19 Apr. 1917, WO 95/4622.

⁹⁴ McPherson papers 80/25/1 Volume XI letter CXI 20 Apr. 1917.

⁹⁵ M. S. Briggs, Through Egypt in War-time (London, 1918), pp. 249-250.

⁹⁶ Bluett p. 144. Adam Block to Lord Hardinge 20 June 1917, Lloyd George papers F/3/2/22.

⁹⁷ Djemal Pasha, p. 181.

consolidating his ground in readiness for more deliberate operations, a telegram which prompted the CIGS to tell his subordinate that he was in doubt as to Murray's actual views and wanted to know 'whether you can with your present force, continue offensive operations with adequate prospect of success.' ⁹⁹ Nor was it until 22 April that Murray admitted that he could not achieve more than 'a local success' without additional troops. ⁹⁹ Under such circumstances morale was bound to collapse - and it did; a great feeling of lethargy fell upon the men of the EEF as they became convinced that little could now happen on their front. ¹⁰⁰

Changes in the command-structure of the Eastern Force followed the defeat at Gaza. General Dobell was replaced by Chatwode and Chauval stepped into Chatwode's shoes as commander of the Desert Column. According to his official telegram to the CIGS Murray stated that he was sending Dobell home because he was suffering from strain due to service in a hot climate which, along with a 'recent touch of sun', rendered him 'unfit' for the approaching summer. ¹⁰¹ In a private letter to Robertson, however, Murray told his Chief that Dobell was going home and Chatwode, whom he preferred, was replacing him. ¹⁰² According to Dobell he visited Advncd HQ at Khan Yunis and was shown a telegram which contained news of his replacement, giving as the reason that he was 'ignorant'; however, Lynden-Bell later phoned to ask Dobell if he would accept the term 'ill health' instead; Dobell agreed and hence the contents of Murray's telegrams already cited. ¹⁰³ This sort of behaviour did not endear the C in C to his subordinates, since Dobell had been popular with many of them and they

⁹⁹ GOC in C Egypt to CIGS 20 Apr. 1917 and CIGS to GOC in C Egypt 21 Apr. 1917, WO 33/905.

⁹⁹ GOC in C Egypt to CIGS 22 Apr. 1917, WO 106/716.

¹⁰⁰ Elgood, p. 304.

¹⁰¹ GOC in C Egypt to CIGS 21 Apr. 1917, WO 106/716.

¹⁰² Murray to Robertson 22 Apr. 1917, B. M. Add. MS 52462.

¹⁰³ 'Personal Note on First and Second Gaza', op. cit.

felt he had been poorly treated. ¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁴ Notes by Major-General S. F. Mott no date, CAB 45/79. Dawnay diary
22 Apr. 1917.

CHAPTER 14

MURRAY'S FINAL MONTHS WITH THE EEF: APRIL - JUNE 1917

'How many "coming men" one has known.
Where on earth do they all go to?'

Pinero

THE EEF ENTRENCHED BUT NOT INACTIVE

On 21 April Chetwode took over command of Eastern Force and immediately made his presence felt among his troops; he rode or walked along the entire defensive line held by his men and instilled a measure of reassurance by his 'strong and guiding personality'.¹ Eastern Force desperately needed an energetic general who showed an interest in the common soldier and his plight because, in the words of the Official History, 'the prospect ahead was not a pleasant one.'²

With the second failure before Gaza over the EEF's front gradually developed a permanence based on something which had become most familiar in France - the trench. Yet we should be careful not to suggest that the situation now facing Chetwode was a 'carbon copy' of the Western Front, because there was one important difference in the very nature of the two defensive lines now being constructed by the EEF and the Turks opposite each other. Both had a completely open flank around the Beersheba area and on this, the British right, the EEF's room for manoeuvre was restricted only by the shortage of water in the countryside. Another difference

1 Australian Official History, pp.342-343.

2 Official History, p.351.

between southern Palestine and the Western Front was the distance between the two trench lines: in the Gaza vicinity the opposing troops could be quite close, but once one reached Sheikh Abbas the two lines diverged, so that around Qamle on the Wadi Ghazze the British positions were nine miles from those of the Turks. Finally, Chetwode was determined to keep his mounted troops active and with this in mind he ensured that there was an exit in the EEF's line so that the cavalry could patrol the open plain between the Wadi Imleih and the Wadi Ghazze.³

In spite of these differences, however, as Chetwode's men began to consolidate their positions, they suffered the frustrations of any entrenched army caused by the continuous digging.⁴ These frustrations were felt at every level from the C in C downwards, and they were not decreased by additional difficulties common to trench warfare.⁵ Flies, the numbers of which seemed 'absolutely past belief', tormented the soldiers as did the weather, which alternated between temperatures of 104° in the shade, gale-force winds and heavy showers of rain; it is hardly surprising, consequently, that at least one officer was forced to comment that life was 'becoming unbearable'.⁶ In fact, matters were worse than the men realized, for plague had broken out around the Suez Canal, brought in by Indian rats, and the fear was that the rats would hide behind any wooden structure, especially those in trenches and dugouts.⁷

3 Chetwode's subordinates did not always fully understand his intention and Chauvel dug a continuous line. See Chetwode to Chauvel 28 May 1917, Chetwode papers PWCI/Folder 3.

4 McGrigor Diary 12 June 1917.

5 Murray to Robertson 3 May 1917, BM Add. MS 52462.

6 Baird Diary 22 & 27 Apr. 1917, Baird MSS Eur. B239.

7 GHQ to GOC Eastern Force 21 May 1917.

Meanwhile, Eastern Force tried to adapt itself to the rigours of trench warfare, for which it was ill-prepared; desperate representations were now made to London asking for an officer who could train men in marksmanship 'as the present situation offers good opportunities for sniping... and we wish to take full advantage of it.'⁸ Orders were issued to the divisional commanders to plan regular trench raids, and Chetwode's general aggressive intentions were outlined:

With the forces at present at our disposal it may not be possible to undertake a general attack, but it may be very possible to conduct deliberate and well thought out operations, planned to the last detail, and assisted by overwhelming concentrations of artillery. ⁹

Limited attacks were sanctioned, therefore, in order to maintain some degree of offensive spirit among the troops, to boost their confidence after two defeats and to unsettle Turkish defensive preparations.¹⁰

If the EEF could not seriously damage the enemy by orthodox methods for the present it could, nevertheless, go on to the offensive in a somewhat different manner. Although the Turks had recently scored two successes over the British their army still consisted of disparate nationalities from across their empire who remained unhappy about the war. Many Turkish deserters who daily crossed the lines told the British that desertion was 'rife' among those units which discovered they had to serve in southern Syria.¹¹

⁸ 19 May 1917, WO 95/4367.

⁹ Dawnay to GOC 52, 53, 54 and 74 Divs. 24 Apr. 1917. Dawnay to GOC 52, 53, 54 and 74 Divs. 23 Apr. 1917, WO 95/4450.

¹⁰ McPherson papers 80/25/1 Vol. XI, Letter CXII, no date.

¹¹ 8 May 1917, WO 95/4367. Intelligence Summary 18 May 1917, WO 157/715.

It seemed sensible, consequently, to try to exploit this weakness in the Turkish ranks, and all sorts of ideas were considered, including the use of a special ship to transport large numbers of deserters to Egypt from behind enemy lines.¹²

But nobody was satisfied with desertion as the best way to sap Turkish strength. In fact, the conclusion of the second engagement at Gaza ushered in a feverish period of planning by the EEF's top staff officers that would lay the foundations for Allenby's successes. We ought not to be confused, as a result, by the very real anger displayed by men like Chetwode when they learnt of London's ignorance about Palestinian conditions:

With regard to the question of convincing the great ones as to the true situation I should have thought that a trench map of the enemy position... with a comparative rifle strength of the opposing forces and a few notes about water would have convinced even a Cabinet Minister. ¹³

What concerns us here is the reason for such sarcasm: Chetwode's frustration that he could not do more sooner, and the inability of the War Cabinet to understand, was the cause - not any lack of offensive spirit or determination to strike at the enemy on his part.

The continuing offensive spirit of the EEF was demonstrated by a major raid it conducted in May. Murray drew Chetwode's attention to the Turkish railway line south of Beersheba which ran to El Auja and could become a threat to Eastern Force's lines of communication; the C in C's solution to this potential menace was the railway's destruction by offensive action - and his subordinate was not slow

12 Intelligence Summary 13 May 1917, WO 157/715. On 19 May a conference was held on the best ways to encourage desertion in the Ottoman army.

13 Chetwode to Lynden-Bell 8 May 1917, Chetwode papers PWCI/ Folder 3.

to agree.¹⁴ Plans were rapidly drawn up and the operation took place on 23 May with two columns involved. The first, the 1st Light Horse Brigade and field engineers, moved on Asluj, 12 miles south of Beersheba; the second included the Imperial Camel Brigade, and its own engineers, and was ordered to make for El Auja.¹⁵ While the engineers worked on the railway the cavalry demonstrated southwest of Beersheba and a bombardment was opened at Gaza in order to distract the enemy. The operation was completely successful: 13 miles of rail were damaged and seven bridges were rendered useless. The importance of this episode lies not in the execution of the raid itself but in what it foreshadowed for the future. For one thing, the entire operation, to a certain extent, resembled the EEF's great breakthrough battle in November 1917 - rapid cavalry action in the Beersheba region and diversionary actions at Gaza. Lest such similarities be thought coincidental or farfetched one final point needs to be made about this action. During the raid some of the mounted troops 'nearly got into' Beersheba, a fact which pleased Chetwode, who considered the greatest achievement of the episode to be the knowledge gained of the terrain around Beersheba: 'All this part of

14 Murray to Chetwode 9 May 1917 and Chetwode to Murray 11 May 1917, Chetwode papers PWCI/Folder 3. These letters prove that Murray's strategic perception prompted Chetwode to launch the raid; the Official History (p.363) is quite wrong, therefore, to ascribe the thinking behind the raid to Chetwode. This episode is most instructive in demonstrating Murray's style of generalship, which could be very successful; he made a most perceptive suggestion to his subordinate that led to a completely successful operation. Of course, such leadership is unobtrusive and therefore receives no attention; it can, nevertheless, be effective.

15 Dawnay to GOC Desert Column 13 May 1917, WO 95/4450

the world will be of great importance to us later on.'¹⁶

Greater and greater attention was being given to the Beersheba area by Eastern Force and GHQ after the Second Battle of Gaza, and this raid accelerated the process. Murray himself had already identified it as the Turks' 'vulnerable point' and Lynden-Bell obviously agreed, because by the end of May he was writing in the following vein: 'We want to narrow our front and if possible strike the enemy's line in the neighbourhood of Beersheba.'¹⁷ On the other hand, Lynden-Bell was also at pains to explain that GHQ was not 'definitely committed' to this plan. This is instructive, for once again a debate was being conducted within the EEF as to the best strategy to employ in order to break the Turkish line. For example, Murray explained the various options to Robertson: the Turkish left was 'fairly accessible', he pointed out, and once the EEF's mounted units broke the Gaza-Beersheba line they could attack anywhere - the only problem being the need for additional pipelines to carry water to the soldiers operating on the Turkish left; on the other hand, there were 'certain advantages' to a further attack from the British left at Gaza, but any such action would depend upon the strength of heavy artillery that the EEF could utilize.¹⁸

In line with this kind of thinking Murray requested an estimate of the amount of heavy artillery ammunition needed to capture the Gaza front. The EEF's artillery expert made his disconcerting calculations on the assumption that any such battle would last for

16 Fergusson to D'Ewes 23 May 1917, Fergusson papers. Chetwode to Lynden-Bell 24 May 1917, Chetwode papers PWCI/Folder 3.

17 Lynden-Bell to Gen. Maurice 26 May 1917, *WO 106/716*.

18 Murray to Robertson 28 May 1917, BM Add. MS 52462.

seven days and the necessary bombardment require double the number of 18-pounders Eastern Force then possessed.¹⁹ Such an estimate was quite beyond the EEF's resources.

Aware of the strategic debate within the EEF, Chetwode opposed a further attack at Gaza: 'the results are hardly likely to be proportionate to the cost.'²⁰ Nor did he approve of the air of uncertainty created by Murray's flexibility and desire to examine every option, for this very flexibility offered Eastern Force's GOC no definite objective to aim at.²¹ The same factor, on the other hand, allowed Chetwode to pursue serious alternatives to a third Gaza assault. This he did with the aid of his most able CGS, Guy Dawnay, who produced a memorandum in the middle of June outlining all the offensive alternatives open to the EEF but strongly advocating an attack in the Beersheba region.²² With the groundrules plainly stated Dawnay and Chetwode now collaborated with their next paper, 'Notes on the Palestine Operations', dated 21 June 1917. The conclusion was consistent with their previous findings:

An attack against the enemy's left flank from Bir Saba to Hariera would afford us the opportunities presented by an open flank, and the advantages of attacking from higher ground and against works less formidable than elsewhere. 23

Of equal significance were the minimum requirements Chetwode believed

19 'Estimated artillery requirements for the capture and consolidation of the enemy's defensive line near Gaza' 29 May 1917. Note by Murray 28 May 1917, Note by Maj.-Gen. Smith 20 June 1917. Note by Capt. Gammell 22 June 1917, WO 95/4451.

20 Chetwode to GHQ 25 May 1917, WO 95/4450.

21 Chetwode to Lynden-Bell 31 May 1917, Chetwode papers PWCI/Folder 3.

22 Memorandum by Dawnay 17 June 1917, Dawnay papers 69/21/2.

23 'Notes on the Palestine Operations' by Chetwode 21 June 1917, Chetwode papers PWCI/Folder 3. Bir Saba is an alternative rendering of Beersheba.

the EEF would need for such operations: seven infantry divisions and three cavalry divisions, no less, for full success. These conclusions were to be of lasting influence since Chetwode sent this appreciation of the situation in Palestine to Allenby in a private letter which the latter received on his arrival in Egypt.²⁴ The new C in C arrived at an opportune time, therefore, as far as the planning of the EEF was concerned. Murray had initiated a complete rethink of the best way to break the Turkish line and had himself realized the weakness of its left flank; Chetwode and Dawnay had developed in detail the strategic and tactical thinking behind the exploitation of this weakness. It was left to Allenby to accept this fresh assessment and, ultimately, to act upon it in November.

Much of the staff work necessary for success was done during Murray's time with the EEF, therefore; his tragedy was that he never had the forces available to execute it. Hence the significance of Chetwode's demands for additional troops if his plans were to become reality - reinforcements which Murray never saw, but which his successor received.

Moreover, in the last months of his time in Egypt Murray laid the foundations of future success in other ways. Although he has been frequently criticized for his command-structure after the creation of Eastern Force and the subsequent advance into Palestine, it has not been recognized that he himself saw the need to alter the arrangements but was overruled by his staff, especially, it would seem, by Lynden-Bell. Murray wrote to the CIGS on the subject in May

24 Chetwode to Edmonds 26 Sept. 1924, Edmonds papers II/1/32.

in the following manner:

I have considered very carefully the question as to whether I should move my General Headquarters to Palestine and take personal command of Eastern Force. This I should naturally have liked to do very much, but the considered opinion of my staff... is that to move... away from Cairo would be to upset completely the military and political machine in Egypt. 25

Even if Murray had not agreed to his staff's assessment any attempt by him to move his GHQ might have been frustrated at a still higher level, because Lynden-Bell had been gathering support for his plans in London at the same time.²⁶ The C in C had nevertheless called into question the existing command-structure. It must have greatly eased Allenby's task in July when he decided to move GHQ to Palestine.

MURRAY'S INSTRUCTIONS ARE CHANGED AGAIN

The almost immediate effect of the Gaza failure in April was to make Robertson uneasy about the last set of instructions he had telegraphed to Murray. Sir Archibald, we remember, had been ordered to engage in operations which would 'justify heavy casualties'.²⁷ Now the CIGS feared the ever-loyal Murray might seek to fulfil these instructions even though the situation no longer offered sufficient chances for major success. Robertson shared this concern with the War Cabinet, explaining that Murray 'was not unlikely, in his desire to carry out his instructions, to undertake a further attack, in which he might lose a very large number of men with doubtful prospects of success.'²⁸ The politicians took Robertson's point; the resulting telegram which the CIGS was authorised to send to Egypt made it clear

25 Murray to Robertson 28 May 1917, BM Add. MS 52462.

26 Lynden-Bell to Gen. Maurice 26 May 1917, op.cit.

27 CIGS to GOC in C Egypt 1 Apr. 1917, WO 33/905.

28 War Cabinet meeting 25 Apr. 1917, CAB 23/2.

that the policy in Palestine had changed - once more. This time, Murray was ordered 'to take every favourable opportunity of defeating the Turkish forces', but the urgency of earlier telegrams was absent and the object of the campaign - driving the Turks from Palestine - seemed only a distant possibility.²⁹

Robertson need not have troubled himself about Murray throwing away men in futile assaults because of blind obedience to clearly impossible orders. The EEF's commander informed the CIGS on 22 April that he felt he had only sufficient men for 'a local success'; once again he stated categorically that he needed five fully-trained divisions for a continuous offensive whereas, at present, he had only three.³⁰ Furthermore, in a letter to Robertson written the same day Murray confessed privately his doubts as to whether he could reach Jerusalem - as requested - and even his belief that if the Turks massed still more men against him he might have to withdraw.³¹ Finally, early in May he admitted to the CIGS that he considered any attempt to commence a general offensive on his front 'out of the question'; all that could be hoped for was a policy of 'active defence' with the forces currently at the EEF's disposal.³² As Murray had already learnt that he could not expect to receive the additional divisions he so desperately needed there seemed little chance of any further advances in Palestine.³³

29 CIGS to GOC in C Egypt 23 Apr. 1917, WO 33/905.

30 GOC in C Egypt to CIGS 22 Apr. 1917, WO 106/716. What may have worried Robertson in this telegram was the following: 'I am prepared to carry on with what I have got if what I ask for cannot be sent, and I will certainly keep the enemy busy.'

31 Murray to Robertson 22 Apr. 1917, BM Add. MS 52462.

32 Murray to Robertson 3 May 1917, BM Add. MS 52462.

33 CIGS to GOC in C Egypt 27 Apr. 1917, WO 33/905.

Although additional troops were not immediately available there was the possibility that they could be obtained from Salonica. The campaign in Macedonia had halted far more ignominiously than the EEF's; moreover, at a time when London was experiencing great stress because of the rampant German submarines, Salonica seemed close to Egypt in terms of troop transportation.³⁴ General Smuts may well have been the first to suggest such a course of action in an important memorandum he submitted on the general strategic situation facing Britain on all fronts.³⁵ Certainly, by early May the British were pushing hard for the transfer of troops from Salonica to Palestine. Henry Wilson noted that Robertson was now trying to get men to Egypt from Salonica.³⁶ Meanwhile, at the Anglo-French conference held in Paris from 4 to 5 May Lloyd George and Robertson found themselves working side by side in an attempt to win over the French. The Prime Minister stressed the urgency of the shipping problem which, he argued, made the support of a force at Salonica impossible; Robertson's argument was that the Allies were risking 'a great disaster' by allowing 600,000 of their troops to be held up by 30,000 Bulgarians when the Turks were massing against the EEF.³⁷

The Salonica solution to Murray's paucity of troops was in many ways ideal for London. Lloyd George had become disillusioned about operations in Macedonia and still looked to Palestine for the success he so desperately sought. Salonica offered him the chance to do a deal with his CIGS who, he believed, had been able to reassert his

³⁴ Roskill, p.382.

³⁵ 'The general strategic and military situation and particularly that on the Western Front' by Smuts, 29 Apr. 1917.

³⁶ Henry Wilson Diary 1 May 1917.

³⁷ Summary of the Proceedings of the Anglo-French Conference held at Paris on May 4 and 5, CAB 28/2.

own negative attitude to a campaign in the Holy Land after Murray's second failure at Gaza.³⁸ The Prime Minister agreed to remove British troops from Salonica (something the CIGS had always wanted) provided these same troops went to Palestine.³⁹ To Robertson the proposal made practical military sense: the strain of supplying the Salonica force was growing; the cavalry in Greece could not be used, whereas Murray might be able to do so (Haig certainly could not on the Western Front!); and a small reserve in Egypt would be useful if trouble arose in India. These were the arguments the CIGS marshalled to convince the French, while simultaneously making it clear that such a move had 'no direct connection with operations in Palestine.'⁴⁰ Although Robertson actually believed that these troops would never be transferred to Egypt because the Royal Navy could not guarantee their safety in transit, he admitted that he was not entirely opposed to further operations in Syria, as he explained to Admiral Jellicoe: 'There is no question as to the value of our getting hold of Palestine if we can. But it is not what we wish to do but what we can do.'⁴¹ Moreover, later in the same month he wrote that if a favourable opportunity offered itself in Palestine he still thought the Turks 'should be licked'.⁴²

Meanwhile, the CIGS had been in contact with General Murray. On 21 May he informed Sir Archibald that the EEF's front line ought to be prepared to maintain five infantry divisions, three cavalry

38 V. H. Rothwell, British war aims and peace diplomacy, 1914-1918 (Oxford, 1971), p.129.

39 D. R. Woodward, Lloyd George and the generals (Newark, 1983), p.168.

40 Robertson to Foch 23 May 1917, Robertson papers I/34/28.

41 Robertson to Jellicoe 18 May 1917, Robertson papers I/36/46.

42 Robertson to Smuts 26 May 1917, Robertson papers I/35/50.

divisions and a full complement of heavy artillery by July!⁴³ In truth Robertson was being placed under almost intolerable pressure, a fact he did not conceal even from official memoranda. In a paper dated 12 June, for example, the CIGS asserted that the Prime Minister had 'impressed upon me' on 'several recent occasions' the need for a decisive campaign in Palestine.⁴⁴

London's deep interest in a Palestine campaign at this time had not been dispersed even by a serious military reverse at Gaza in April. Leo Amery, for example, still hoped to do 'something really effective in Palestine'; with this in mind, he wanted to form a small committee to look into future developments in the Balkans and Palestine.⁴⁵ His suggestion bore fruit in the creation of the War Policy Committee, comprising the Prime Minister, Curzon, Milner and Smuts, which enabled Lloyd George to articulate his opinion that Turkey and Austria should now be the main object of Allied offensives.⁴⁶

Smuts had always made it clear that if an offensive was intended in Syria such a campaign would ultimately 'in all probability assume an importance eventually second only to that of the Western Front.'⁴⁷ He considered it ought to be a condition of this command that the necessary forces be provided. He drew up a

43 CIGS to GOC in C Egypt 21 May 1917, WO 33/935.

44 'Military policy in the various theatres of war', 12 June 1917 by CIGS, WO 106/1512.

45 Amery to Lloyd George 5 June 1917, Lloyd George papers F/2/1/4.

46 Woodward, p.170.

47 'The general strategic and military situation and particularly that on the Western Front', op.cit.

rough plan as to how these might be used and advocated landing a force of some 100,000 men at Haifa in order to crush the Turkish forces in Palestine.⁴⁸ He realized a massive effort was required to ensure success in the Palestine campaign, and he did not believe this could be justified. Thus his Haifa scheme died and, for a time, the enthusiasts for a rapid conquest of the Holy Land were held in check.⁴⁹ Interestingly enough, however, Smuts' ideas for an amphibious assault were not unique in the summer of 1917; Sir Reginald Wingate suggested a similar kind of operation to Robertson twice in June.⁵⁰

One obvious obstacle to a major campaign in Palestine was the condition of Russia. The original intention had been to combine any offensive in Palestine with a simultaneous effort by the Russians in the Caucasus; with the internal turmoil of the Russian state, however, this looked increasingly unlikely.⁵¹ It was the CIGS's opinion that the collapse of the Russian war effort was of monumental significance to operations in Palestine. He believed the loss of the Russian component made a successful campaign to capture Jerusalem 'very doubtful' without using an 'altogether disproportionate' number of troops, while it certainly meant the end to all ideas of advancing as far north as Aleppo. The CIGS's advice was plain: Britain should confine herself primarily to the defence of Egypt, at the same time being careful to take advantage

48 Robertson to Jellicoe 11 May 1917, Robertson papers I/36/45.

49 Smuts to Lloyd George 31 May 1917, Lloyd George papers F/45/9/4. The background to Smuts' suggestions was that he had been offered command of the EEF, as we shall see.

50 Wingate to Robertson 12 June 1917 and 26 June 1917, Wingate papers 164/8/178.

51 Robertson to Milner 8 May 1917, Milner papers MS Milner dep 45 folio 57-58.

of 'any favourable opportunity' to strike at the Turks.⁵² Robertson was certainly reflecting the view of the EEF, for GHQ in Egypt feared that the collapse of Russia might release a large number of Turkish troops who would find their way to Palestine.⁵³

Conversely, the possible collapse of the Russian war effort appeared to have precisely the opposite effect in some circles in London. Hankey, for example, believed that there was a possibility of forcing a separate peace on Turkey if a final and successful attack could be launched on her while Russia was disabled.⁵⁴ Lloyd George took up this line of reasoning as well; he argued that if Russia was about to leave the war Britain needed to gain as many bargaining counters as possible when she came to negotiate with Germany, of which Palestine would be one.⁵⁵ Moreover, in a conference at the Foreign Office to consider the possible consequences of a Russian withdrawal from the war Leo Amery came away with the opinion that the question of operations in Palestine was now 'of increasing importance'.⁵⁶ Meanwhile, since the March revolution in Russia Curzon had chaired a sub-committee on the effects of a Russian departure from the conflict, and he maintained that Britain needed a Palestine offensive to secure Egypt and defeat the Turkish forces in the region before they were powerfully reinforced by troops from the Caucasus.⁵⁷

52 'Military effect of Russia seceding from the Entente' by CIGS 9 May 1917, Robertson papers.

53 Lynden-Bell to Chetwode 5 May 1917, Chetwode papers PWCI/Folder 3.

54 Memorandum on the war by Hankey 18 Apr. 1917, CAB 63/20.

55 Woodward, pp.162-166.

56 J. Barnes & D. Nicholson (eds.), The Leo Amery diaries, 1896-1929 (London, 1980), I, p.158.

57 'Policy in view of Russian developments' by Curzon 12 May 1917, CAB 24/12.

Views like these demonstrate the difference between London and Cairo that now existed and gave birth to a real sense of grievance in the EEF because, it was felt, the War Cabinet did not grasp the problems facing the army. Lynden-Bell expressed himself forcefully on the subject:

the people at home do not understand the situation at all out here, and cannot in any way visualise the difficulties of the ground and of obtaining water. I gather... that the pundits of the War Cabinet have gone mad over... getting into Jerusalem, and they cannot understand why we are not already in possession of Jerusalem. 58

A dangerous chasm had opened, therefore, between the expectations of London and those of the EEF, and relations were starting to break down. In an effort to improve matters Murray sent a full appreciation of his position and its prospects to the War Office. In it he argued that the EEF now faced up to eight Turkish divisions (through the collapse of the Russian war effort) in strongly entrenched positions, while his own troops were dangerously under-strength, so that he felt he could attempt only an 'active defensive' policy at present. In a strongly worded paragraph he sought to explain what was the true purpose of this official letter:

I feel bound to place the actual situation before you as clearly as possible, in order that there may be no misapprehension... as regards the causes which have made my rapid advance into Palestine... now no longer possible. 59

So Murray, egged on by his staff and by the nature of the situation in which he found himself, had decided to adopt a far more obstinate attitude towards the CIGS and his political superiors in London than was usual. Sadly for him it was now too late to save his career; but

58 Lynden-Bell to Chetwode 5 May 1917, Chetwode papers PWCI/Folder 3.
 59 C in C EEF to CIGS 7 May 1917, CAB 24/13 G.T.754.

it was probably in time to help his successor.

Murray went on to assert that although on paper he had five infantry divisions in reality he had only three, because the 74th Division possessed no artillery and required further training, while the 75th existed only on paper. Even this fact did not adequately demonstrate the EEF's appalling weakness at this time, for Murray's other three infantry divisions were all undermanned: the C in C estimated that he required 350 officers and 9,000 other ranks to bring them up to full strength. Because of these shortages Sir Archibald made it plain that there could be no question of his attempting any offensive operations for the present; all he could do was to adopt a policy of 'active defence'.⁶⁰

Together with this important communication to the CIGS Murray sent another on the subject of railways. In this, he made a startling claim: once the 74th and 75th Divisions were ready for the front the existing rail system would be 'strained to the limit of its capacity' so that, if it were intended to reinforce the EEF, the railways would have to be improved. He therefore suggested concentrating every effort on his communications over the next few months.⁶¹

These two letters gave Robertson and the General Staff in London much to chew over; they made the situation in Palestine absolutely plain. And they were needed, for even the CIGS had not yet grasped the true nature of the situation there. He was still

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Murray to CIGS 7 May 1917, Chetwode papers PWCI/Folder 3.

writing to Murray in May, for example, urging him to give the Turks 'a really bad knock' even if it meant his not advancing very far. By advocating such a course of action the CIGS was not thinking of a full-scale offensive but rather of some kind of attritional encounter. Nonetheless he still seemed much taken by Murray's 'fine mounted troops' and was disappointed that more could not be done with them because of a shortage of water.⁶²

But Sir Archibald would not budge from his reading of the situation. His last letter to Robertson before being replaced as C in C made this clear:

If the Force is not to receive a further Division, or Divisions, the strength will only admit of sapping forward gradually and gaining local successes. Should it be the intention to assign to the Force more Divisions it is obviously the GOC's duty... to wait for them... and not to weaken his force piecemeal. ⁶³

In the same letter Murray admitted that it had been his great wish to begin doubling the rail system at once so that if it were decided to send out more troops at a later date a more vigorous offensive policy would be possible.⁶⁴

Murray left Palestine having made it absolutely clear that the Government must take a decision: either the EEF be reinforced and its railways upgraded, or abandon all thought of the occupation of Palestine. From now on, it was as if the departing C in C had said, there could be no more half-measures as in the past, half-measures that, one might argue, had cost Murray his post.

⁶² Robertson to Murray 12 May 1917, Robertson papers I/32/58.

⁶³ Murray to Robertson 12 June 1917, BM Add. MS 52462.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

MURRAY IS DISMISSED

Sir Archibald was informed on 11 June 1917 by telegram from the Secretary of State for War that the War Cabinet had decided to effect a change in the command of the EEF. In polite but pregnant words the message explained that while the Government appreciated his 'good work' they considered it 'desirable in the public interest' to replace him with General Allenby, who would leave England that very week.⁶⁵ This blow to all Murray's hopes was delivered to him at 7.30 a.m. on 12 June, and we can assume that it ruined his breakfast although he remains as reserved as ever about it in his diary.⁶⁶

The decision came as something of a shock to many in the EEF, Chetwode describing it as 'astounding news' when he was informed.⁶⁷ Such was not the case in London nor among senior generals in France. For example, as early as 29 April Henry Wilson heard a rumour that Murray was to be recalled, although he had no idea who would replace him.⁶⁸ By May, moreover, both Cavan and Godley had heard that Murray was in danger, although in Godley's case at least his information suggested that Murray would actually survive.⁶⁹ There were those who almost willed these rumours to be true; one of these, not surprisingly, was General Maxwell, who confessed to 'a feeling of some satisfaction' on learning of Murray's possible predicament.⁷⁰

65 Secretary of State for War to Gen. Sir A. Murray 11 June 1917, WO 33/935.

66 Murray Diary 12 June 1917 simply reads: 'Lynden-Bell brought me the news at 7.30 a.m. that I was recalled and that Allenby would succeed me.'

67 Chetwode to Murray 13 June 1917, Wingate papers 145/8/68.

68 Henry Wilson Diary 29 Apr. 1917.

69 Cavan to Chetwode 11 May 1917 and Godley to Chetwode 25 May 1917, Chetwode papers PWCI/Folder 3.

70 Maxwell to Henry Wilson 8 May 1917, Henry Wilson papers 73/1/21.

Meanwhile, Lady Murray told Repington that she was 'much exercised' about her husband's future because his recall was 'persistently advertised in conversation.'⁷¹ Indeed, it is very likely that she passed this anxiety on to her husband for, in a rare admission of emotion in his diary, Murray noted on 11 May that his most recent mail from home concerned a 'worrying matter.'⁷² If this was so he must have felt insecure from the middle of May, a supposition that can be substantiated by a comment he made to Robertson in a letter dated 20 May, when he wrote that he realized how much he himself owed to Robertson's 'firmness' of purpose 'if half the gossip I hear from home is true.'⁷³

What then was the source of all this gossip and why were the rumours of Murray's dismissal so strong in April and May when he was not in fact replaced until 11 June 1917? For an answer we must turn to discussions within the War Cabinet as early as 5 April. On this day the War Cabinet discussed the possible removal of Murray in the belief that 'he has not the energy and go to force through the Palestine expedition successfully.'⁷⁴ On the following day, however, a decision was taken to allow him to remain in command of the EEF until after his next offensive (i.e., the second battle of Gaza).⁷⁵ His fate was sealed, therefore, as early as 6 April, and

71 Repington, p.565. 7-11 May 1917.

72 Murray Diary 11 May 1917.

73 Murray to Robertson 20 May 1917, BM Add. MS 52462.

74 Hankey Diary 5 April 1917, HNKY 1/2.

75 'Operations in Palestine' by CIGS 23 Apr. 1917, CAB 24/11 G.T.533. There is no mention of this decision in the official minutes of the War Cabinet for 5 and 6 Apr. and it can only be traced in Hankey's diary, this memorandum by Robertson and the War Cabinet minutes for 23 Apr. (CAB 23/2) which refer to a conference on the subject 5-6 Apr., the minutes of which were neither printed nor circulated.

it was never the War Cabinet's intention for him to lead British troops into the planned winter offensive in Palestine - although Hankey's published memoirs certainly try to give the impression that it was Murray's failure at the Second Battle of Gaza which precipitated his downfall.⁷⁶

This delayed decision by the members of the War Cabinet is open to severe criticism, as Robertson himself noted at the time, for it meant that they pressed on with a general in whom they did not have the fullest confidence and whom they intended to replace anyway.⁷⁷ If Murray was not the man for the job he should have been replaced at once: why, then, was he not? One reason was quite simply that he still engendered a fair degree of loyalty in the breasts of many in London. Robertson himself admitted that he had fought a battle for Murray before the War Cabinet after the news of the first clash at Gaza had filtered through to the politicians.⁷⁸ Repington remained Murray's most ardent supporter, at the same time, and continued to do all he could to stimulate others to help his friend's cause.⁷⁹ Meanwhile, Lloyd George, who had been dissatisfied with Murray 'for some time' and who clearly had been one of the main instigators behind the decision of 6 April, tried to influence Lord Derby to see the need for Sir Archibald's removal; while he was ultimately successful, it must have taken a certain degree of effort on his part, for he was not completely sure about Derby's position even after the attempt.⁸⁰ Finally, some of the

76 Hankey, II, p.637.

77 Repington, p.514. 13 Apr. 1917.

78 Ibid.

79 Ibid., p.565. 7-11 May 1917.

80 A. J. P. Taylor (ed.), Lloyd George: a diary by Frances Stevenson (London, 1971), pp.153-154. 23 Apr. 1917.

military staff felt that Murray's dismissal would crown a most unfair wartime career with yet another disappointment.⁸¹ A comment by Maxwell on Murray's lack of popularity at the time in London is, therefore, to be viewed with some distrust: 'I hear our "Wullie" is the only one in Great Britain who wishes the great Sir Archie to remain in Egypt, the former I think is getting tired, the latter remains what he always was.'⁸² It would seem, therefore, that although the War Cabinet had decided to replace Murray in early April there existed afterwards a significant body of opinion sympathetic towards the doomed general's prospects. This can be seen even in the official War Cabinet papers themselves, for the report on the meeting of 6 April explained that all present 'recognized the exceptionally good' work done by Murray in Egypt.⁸³ Unfortunately, Murray's second failure at Gaza finally discredited his supporters in London, when a success might just have been enough to strengthen his support and even reverse the original decision.⁸⁴ So at the War Cabinet of 23 April the decision was taken, with the 'concurrence' of the CIGS and the Secretary of State for War, to remove Murray.⁸⁵ Everyone, including Lord Derby, was now in line: Murray must go. Robertson was responsible for bringing the crisis to a head on 23 April, as it was he who reminded the War Cabinet of their conclusions of 6 April; his motive, however, was

81 Callwell to Wingate 6 June 1917, Wingate papers 168/8/22.

82 Maxwell to Henry Wilson 20 May 1917, Henry Wilson papers 73/1/21.

83 Operations in Palestine, op.cit.

84 For evidence that the matter was not entirely settled see Robertson to Maude 9 Apr. 1917, Robertson papers I/14/70. The CIGS asked Maude for suggestions as to replacements for Murray, but added: 'This is all very much in the air and by no means certain to materialise.'

85 War Cabinet meeting 23 Apr. 1917, CAB 23/2.

not to force Murray out but rather to make his political masters face the harsh realities of the situation and either remove Murray or give him their total support: 'It is... very necessary that the War Cabinet have full confidence in the Commander, not only when he is successful but also when, sometimes, he is not, for no Commander can guarantee success at all times.'⁸⁶ Yet this was still only 23 April, and Murray was not officially telegraphed about his recall until 11 June: what caused this further delay in the implementation of the War Cabinet's decision?

The problem with any dismissal is always whom to appoint to fill the vacancy. Ideally, of course, those who dismiss a general have already unanimously decided who should replace him. This was not the case in April and May 1917, when several different names were put forward. Almost immediately after the meeting of 6 April Robertson started to search for possible candidates if it became necessary to find employment for Murray elsewhere. He contacted General Maude in Mesopotamia, asking whether he considered General Cobbe suitable for Egypt, or, should Maude himself be sent to Egypt, whether Cobbe could handle Mesopotamia. Maude's reply made no comment on the possibility of his own transfer to Egypt, simply stating that General Marshall, also under his command, was a better soldier than Cobbe - an opinion he shared with General Monro in India, whom the CIGS also consulted.⁸⁷ How serious Robertson was about these suggestions it is impossible to tell, but his tentative enquiries caused Maude to confide to Marshall that the latter might lose his chief to Egypt.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Operations in Palestine, op.cit.

⁸⁷ Robertson to Maude 9 Apr. 1917, Robertson papers I/14/70. Maude to Robertson 11 Apr. 1917, Robertson papers I/14/71. Monro to Robertson 14 Apr. 1917, Robertson papers I/14/72.

⁸⁸ Marshall, p.248.

Lord Milner, another member of the War Cabinet, had his own favourite for the post: Henry Wilson. Milner wrote to Wilson in the middle of May saying that he had considered him for the command but had made no move because he feared that no significant operations would be attempted in the region; should things change for the better, however, he would put Wilson's name forward.⁸⁹ The Prime Minister himself was 'mad keen' on General Smuts assuming the command.⁹⁰ At the War Cabinet meeting of 23 April Smuts was the only name mentioned as a possible successor to Murray, although he was described only as 'one of the most suitable selections'; this proves that Lloyd George's energetic support for Smuts did not render irrelevant the various other candidates, especially as there were those who felt the South African's qualities could be better used 'in the higher conduct of the war'.⁹¹

On 25 April the War Cabinet again tackled the issue without arriving at a decision on Murray's replacement. Smuts' name was again the only one mentioned, but this time more objections were raised to his candidature: he would not be popular with the large Australian contingent and, more important, he had 'no experience in the modern conditions of European warfare, which also prevailed to some extent in the Palestine Campaign.'⁹²

Smuts himself was placed under considerable pressure to accept the appointment to the Egyptian command, with Lloyd George trying to make the post seem as attractive as possible. Smuts described his

89 Milner to Henry Wilson 19 May 1917, Henry Wilson papers 73/1/21.

90 Ibid.

91 War Cabinet meeting 23 Apr. 1917, CAB 23/2.

92 War Cabinet meeting 25 Apr. 1917, CAB 23/2.

position to a friend: 'I was taken on a high hill and shown the kingdoms of the world'.⁹³ The Prime Minister certainly tried to 'tempt' the South African with talk of 'the last and greatest crusade'.⁹⁴ As Hankey noted in his diary, the Prime Minister was 'trying very hard' to win Smuts over.⁹⁵ Even Smuts' own South African Government wanted him to accept the offer, but he remained unsure of what to do and sought advice from different quarters.⁹⁶ The War Cabinet actually sent Robertson specially to see Smuts to discover his thinking, for they were under the impression that he would take the command only if sufficient troops were made available 'to carry the Expedition to a successful conclusion.'⁹⁷ Before visiting Smuts Robertson told Milner that he felt 'it would certainly be foolish and might be fatal for the Cabinet to give any kind of promise that the wants of Palestine shall be supplied to the full extent'; after all, he went on, did not what we could give to Palestine depend upon the situation in France?⁹⁸

Robertson's meeting with Smuts convinced the CIGS of the South African's views: 'Smuts does not wish to go unless it is going to be a real thing, and he doubts the feasibility of this.'⁹⁹ Nevertheless, the Prime Minister, Lord Derby and Robertson all requested to see Smuts one last time in the hope that he might yet

93 W. K. Hancock & J. van der Poel (eds.), Smuts papers (Cambridge, 1966), III, p.528. Smuts to M. C. Gillett 31 May 1917.

94 Ibid., p.480. Smuts to S. M. Smuts 27 Apr. 1917.

95 Hankey Diary 9 May 1917, HNKY 1/3.

96 Hancock & van der Poel, III, p.300. G. Brebner to Mrs Smuts 10 May 1917.

97 War Cabinet meeting 8 May 1917, CAB 23/2.

98 Robertson to Milner 8 May 1917, MS Milner dep 45 folio 57-58.

99 Robertson to Jellicoe 11 May 1917, Robertson papers I/36/45.

accept the offer; time was now running out and the CIGS told Smuts that if a new man was to take over in Egypt the decision had to be made 'at once'.¹⁰⁰ This time Robertson appears to have made a more concrete promise of support for a major campaign in Palestine than he had done previously, thus impressing Smuts. Smuts gave Leo Amery the impression that his requirements had been met and that he might be going to Palestine after all.¹⁰¹ If Amery is correct it seems possible that Robertson may have promised much more than we know he did in his letter to the South African. Whether Smuts was given the wrong impression or the CIGS was overruled by an aggressive Lloyd George is not clear, but what appears to have happened is that Robertson subsequently informed Smuts there was no real hope of substantial reinforcements for Palestine.¹⁰² In his perplexity Smuts sought the counsel of his old adversary in South Africa, Lord Milner, who seems to have been of the opinion that he would do well to reject the command.¹⁰³

Smuts finally decided to reject the command and he sent two letters to the Prime Minister. The first was a personal letter to Lloyd George assuring him of the great honour he felt at being offered the post; the second officially outlined his reasons for declining the appointment and gave his views on the future of the Palestine campaign itself. In this second, most interesting,

100 Robertson to Smuts 26 May 1917, Robertson papers I/33/50.

101 Barnes & Nicholson, I, p.158. 29 May 1917.

102 Ibid., p.159. 31 May 1917.

103 Ibid. and Milner Diary 30 May 1917, MS Milner dep 88. These were the most influential factors in Smuts' decision and not, as has been suggested, a telegram from Botha urging Smuts to decline the command because he was no general. For a full discussion of this see Hancock, Smuts: the sanguine years (Cambridge, 1962), I, pp.433-435.

letter Smuts clearly states that he considers a Palestine campaign a 'mistake' unless at least the capture of Jerusalem is made 'a reasonable certainty' and all the reinforcements necessary are 'assured' - anything less would serve no real purpose and might appear as a 'fresh failure'.¹⁰⁴

At the War Cabinet meeting of 5 June it was officially recorded that Smuts had declined appointment to the Palestine command. The question before the Cabinet now was who should replace Murray with their prime candidate out of the race. The minutes read that there was 'some discussion as to the qualifications of the different generals for the post'.¹⁰⁵ We have already noted that there were several possible candidates and General Byng, writing only a few days before this meeting, commented: 'There seems to be a good deal of discussion going on as to who is to command in Egypt, every sort of name has been mentioned and some of us have been sitting on rather prickly thorns.'¹⁰⁶ That General Allenby was chosen as the next commander of the EEF probably owed less to his suitability for the post than to events on the Western Front. Allenby had been responsible for the planning and execution of the recent Arras campaign, which had generally been regarded as a failure; Allenby had never enjoyed favourable relations with GHQ and now Haig asked for his removal. Allenby, therefore, was available and by suggesting him for Egypt the CIGS could kill two birds with one stone: Haig would be appeased and so, in turn, would be the Prime Minister, for Allenby was, by experience and

¹⁰⁴ Smuts to Lloyd George 31 May 1917, Lloyd George papers F/45/9/3. Smuts to Lloyd George 31 May 1917, Lloyd George papers F/45/9/4.

¹⁰⁵ War Cabinet meeting 5 June 1917, CAB 23/3.

¹⁰⁶ Byng to Chetwode 30 May 1917, Chetwode papers PWCI/Folder 3.

inclination, a cavalry general and so more acceptable to the Welshman, who still harboured grand designs of a major offensive in Palestine.¹⁰⁷ It was a master-stroke by Robertson and leads one to suggest that there were occasions when he could 'handle' his Prime Minister without any kind of direct confrontation and get his own way.

If the CIGS can be applauded for finally extracting a decision from the War Cabinet that was generally acceptable in London, there were strong grounds for criticising the actual decision from the EEF's perspective, at least. For one thing, the delay in the process of selecting a replacement for Murray left the new commander with little time to acclimatise to conditions in Palestine, especially as Allenby departed for England on 11 June and set off for Egypt on 22 June, which hardly allowed him much time to prepare for an autumn offensive. The story of Lloyd George presenting Allenby with his personal copy of Adam Smith's volumes on Palestine - so often recounted as in some way laudable or at least 'romantic' - probably reflects to a certain extent the generally 'cavalier' attitude of the authorities in London to this new appointment, therefore.¹⁰⁸ Henry Wilson dined with Allenby on the very evening that he commenced his journey east, and noted in his diary that Allenby had been told nothing except that he would get some new divisions and that Lloyd George was still 'desperately anxious' for him to reach Jerusalem - scarcely the sort of briefing likely to instil confidence in the hearts of the

107 Edmonds papers Edmonds III/2. Unpublished memoirs, Chapter XIV. Edmonds claims Wavell deliberately kept this information out of his biography of Allenby.

108 B. Gardner, Allenby (London, 1965), pp.112-115.

troops in Egypt, who were shortly to receive their new C in C.¹⁰⁹

The choice of Allenby was not viewed with much optimism by those who knew Egypt and Palestine. As Birdwood explained to Wingate, the new C in C of the EEF possessed no relevant experience whatever to draw upon for his new role; 'I am rather wondering how [he]... will get on, as he has no experience whatever of the East, and I doubt if he has ever set eyes on a Mohammedan!'¹¹⁰ Chetwode, moreover, writing from his GHQ in the Sinai, failed to see much logic in the appointment, since it meant 'replacing a man with all the local knowledge... at his fingers' ends, by one who... must take many weeks to get the "atmosphere" of the campaign.'¹¹¹

Murray was terribly disappointed by the news of his recall and there were those about him who realized this. Lynden-Bell, writing to General Maurice after Murray had left Egypt, asked his friend to be 'kind' to Sir Archibald because he 'feels his knock very very deeply.'¹¹² The true depth of Murray's feelings can be gauged by his comments on the matter as late as 1941: 'I feel the injustice just as much today as 24 years ago... the recall from Egypt hurt too deeply.'¹¹³ Yet Murray won the respect of many by the way in which he conducted himself once he had received the news.¹¹⁴ His remarkably dignified behaviour contrasts most

109 Henry Wilson Diary 22 June 1917.

110 Birdwood to Wingate 22 June 1917.

111 Chetwode to Murray 13 June 1917, Wingate papers 145/8/68.

112 Lynden-Bell to Gen. Maurice 3 July 1917, WO 106/718.

113 Murray to Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Longmore 21 May 1941, Murray papers 79/48/4.

114 Hill, p.109. Hill quotes a letter by Brig.-Gen. Anderson recounting the experience of an Australian officer who called on Murray half an hour after the fateful telegram had arrived: 'He accepted the situation in a very fine way, and had nothing but good things to say of his successor and the excellence of his selection.'

favourably with Maxwell's, who had caused the maximum amount of trouble over his recall, thereby significantly hindering Murray's efforts to rationalise a confusing situation. This time the departing general did everything in his power to resolve any possible problems for his successor, with the result that we must ascribe to him some of the credit for Allenby's success.

The day after receiving official news of his recall Murray wrote a private letter to Robertson in which he made no mention of any complaint he might have about his dismissal; his letter was full of advice on how best to continue the campaign.¹¹⁵ Moreover, when Allenby landed at Alexandria Murray made sure he was met by Lynden-Bell and brought to Cairo, where Murray greeted him at the station in the evening of 27 June. The following day Murray and Allenby sat in conference together from 10 a.m. until 12.45 p.m., and on 29 June Allenby officially took over command of the EEF.¹¹⁶ So rapidly, in fact, had Murray organized the handover that some of Allenby's staff were caught out, because they had been hoping to occupy Murray's mess only to find that it had been already 'broken up'.¹¹⁷

Once Murray had briefed Allenby he kept himself away from the new C in C with the clear intention of affording him a free hand and not cramping his style.¹¹⁸ Indeed, it was not long before Murray sailed for home; he did so on 1 July 1917.¹¹⁹ In London he found

115 Murray to Robertson 12 June 1917, BM Add. MS 52462.

116 Murray Diary 27-29 June 1917.

117 Letter by Dick Andrew, Allenby papers 6/VIII/2.

118 Evans to Wavell 5 Jan. 1938, Allenby papers 6/VIII/46.

119 Murray Diary 1 July 1917. Murray sailed for Brindisi on this day.

there were those who were ready to meet him, but they seem to have been largely other discarded generals such as Ian Hamilton, Lord French and Wolfe Murray.¹²⁰ As for the Government itself, even after Murray had been in London for a week, it did not ask him for his views or attempt to draw on his experience; in fact, if Repington is to be believed, Smuts did not even know that Murray had returned when he met the journalist on 17 July.¹²¹ This was surely shabby treatment towards a man who had served his country so loyally. It was also somewhat foolish, for it was undoubtedly true that Murray could have provided the War Cabinet with a great deal of most useful information.

120 Murray Diary 18-29 July 1917.

121 Repington, pp.615-617. 14 and 17 July 1917.

CHAPTER 15THE EEF AND THE ARABS: JANUARY 1916 - JUNE 1917

'The jealousy of Sir Archibald Murray
might have wrecked the Sherif's rebellion.'

T. E. Lawrence

MURRAY'S EARLIEST EXPERIENCES OF THE ARABS

When General Murray arrived in Egypt in January 1916 there seemed some prospect of trouble for the Turks in Syria. According to Egyptian Intelligence food shortages and executions by Turkish troops had caused discontent in the region, but nobody was quite sure if this would be enough to initiate a general revolt.¹ On the other hand, Italian sources seemed to suggest that it would, for they picked up news of various disturbances in Syria.² Perhaps more significantly Egypt learnt that Nuri Shalaan had withdrawn deep into the desert to the east of Syria, which suggested that he might be preparing to oppose the Turks openly.³ Unfortunately for British hopes, similar events had occurred in Syria in the prewar years, but they had not led to a general revolt then - nor would they now. Moreover, even talk of possible negotiations with Djemal Pasha seemed in reality to be merely an attempt by the Ottoman leader to sow suspicion between Britain and the Arabs.⁴ There had been tangible benefits, nevertheless, and Cairo had not lost all

1 Intelligence Summary 5-11 Jan. 1916, WO 157/700.

2 F.O. to McMahon 12 Jan. 1916, FO 371/2769/5209.

3 DMI Egypt to W.O. 15 Jan. 1916, FO 371/2668/9639.

4 See Negotiations with Djemal 11 Jan. 1916, FO 371/2767/5824.

hope of possible action in Syria by the indigenous population. For example, it was known that the Turks could not obtain enough camels for a major advance on Egypt because Nuri Shalaan's tribe, the Anazeh, refused to assist them.⁵ Meanwhile the War Office sought the fullest possible information as⁺the attitudes of the various peoples of Syria, together with their military strength, including the Druse and Kurds, from an Arab friendly to the British cause then with the Indian forces in Mesopotamia.⁶

As early as February 1916 Murray began to discover that he might be drawn into serious operations in Arabia if he was not careful. For example, it was suggested that he should combine his efforts with the navy in an attack at Jeddah on the coast of the Hejaz partly because there was talk of enemy submarines in the vicinity. Sir Archibald asked Maxwell for advice and he opposed the action since it would mean landing 'infidels' in the Hejaz close to the holiest places of Islam. Murray agreed, and objected also on the grounds that such an operation would probably require at least a brigade and might disrupt the defensive works then being constructed at the Canal.⁷ In March Vice-Admiral Wemyss, the Naval C in C of the East Indies, recommended to Murray that, since there were currently in Egypt military resources 'greater than the situation requires', a combined operation could be tried at Aden, where the Turks had attempted to seize the territory from the British. Lynden-Bell suggested that the admiral might help by bombing the Turkish arms depot with his seaplanes, but that no

5 Intelligence Memo. The Turkish railway to the Egyptian frontier 12 Jan. 1916, WO 157/700.

6 Cairo to C in C India 13 Jan. 1916, L/MIL/17/5/3908.

7 Superflux to Chief Medforce 21 Feb. 1916 and Chief Medforce to Chief London 22 Feb. 1916, WO 95/4361.

troops could possibly be sent from Egypt. Murray's views on the matter were not quite identical: he believed that the entire affair did not fall within his sphere of influence; as a result, he could neither help nor interfere.⁸

Meanwhile, the Sherif of Mecca and his numerous sons had already begun to be of positive assistance to the British cause in Egypt. Feisal was in Syria and hoped to win over the Arab element in any large Turkish attack upon the Canal, while the Sherif's eldest son, Abdullah, had moved north towards Medina and the Hejaz railway.⁹ Feisal also started to feed Cairo information about Turkish intentions in Syria, although there was some concern in April as to whether he could be trusted at all because it was thought he had been talking to Ottoman leaders.¹⁰ Attempts were also made by Cairo to get the Sherif to convince Ibn Rashid not to sell camels to the enemy, thereby reducing the mobility of their forces in desert areas.¹¹ Moreover, there was even talk of using Britain's good relations with Hussein to assist the desperate situation at Kut, where General Townshend's troops were encircled. India suggested that since the Sherif was seeking to detach the Arab element in the Turkish army in Syria the same tactic might be tried in Mesopotamia.¹² Unfortunately, it soon became clear that there was nothing the Sherif, or Feisal in Syria, could do to save

8 Wemyss to Murray 1 Mar. 1916. Note by Lynden-Bell 3 Mar. 1916. Note by Murray 4 Mar. 1916, WO 158/607.

9 High Commissioner, Egypt to F.O. 1 Mar. 1916, FO 141/461/1198.

10 Extract from Intelligence Summary, Cairo 21 Mar. 1916, L/MIL/17/5/3910. Clayton to Governor-General, Erkowit 22 Apr. 1916, FO 882/4/116772.

11 Intelligence Summary, GHQ IEF 'D' 25 Apr. 1916, WO 157/786.

12 Viceroy, Foreign Department to F.O. 24 Mar. 1916, FO 371/2768/56911.

Townshend in time, and the suggestion was dropped.¹³

But Hussein's assistance had to be bought, as Murray soon discovered. On 21 March 1916 Clayton explained to the C in C that the Sherif had asked for a British landing on the Syrian coast and although Murray rejected the proposal this was not the end of the matter by any means.¹⁴ In April Hussein's precise aims became a trifle clearer; he wanted British troops to land in Syria and occupy the railway line connecting Syria and Anatolia 'so as to make it easy for our friends in Syria to rise up with their followers who expect relief to come to them.' The Sherif was clear as to the correct chronology of events in any revolt, moreover: his followers in the Hejaz would act first and seize the railway connecting Medina with Damascus before moves were begun in Syria with the support of British troops, who had been landed, presumably, in the Alexandretta region.¹⁵ This general strategic plan submitted by Hussein reflected the true strength of Arab nationalism and opposition to Turkish rule in Syria: It was now obvious that discontented groups there, such as the Druse, would not act without direct military support, while the Arab chiefs to the east were currently too dispersed to lead a significant revolt alone.¹⁶

Scrutiny of Arabian affairs in Egypt was intensified early in 1916 by the formation of the Arab Bureau. This move had been agreed

13 Clayton to Governor-General 22 Apr. 1916, op.cit.

14 Intelligence Summary GHQ EEF 21 Mar. 1916, WO 157/702.

15 Sherif Hussein to High Commissioner, Egypt 18 Apr. 1916, FO 141/461/1198.

16 Note by H. Cumberbatch 2 Apr. 1916, FO 371/2768/64300. McMahon to F.O. 18 Apr. 1916, FO 371/2768/74130.

upon in January 1916 in London at a special conference. This new body was to be organized as a section of the existing Sudan Intelligence Department in Cairo and would harmonize British political activity in the Near East together with propaganda among the Arab peoples of the region.¹⁷ In fact, the Arab Bureau's job was to study developments among the Arabs and collect information about them. The day-to-day running of this new office in Cairo was to be supervised by the already overworked but most influential Clayton under the general control of the High Commissioner and the Foreign Office. The first director of the Bureau was D. G. Hogarth, who did not begin work until April 1916. He later described the Bureau as 'a sort of general liaison Intelligence Department', which, along with Clayton's crucial role in Cairo, explains why it did have such an influence upon Sir Archibald and his staff at Ismailia.¹⁸

In the meantime, as the EEF began its advance into the Sinai Murray's troops came into close contact with the Bedouin tribes of this desert - and they did not like what they found! For example, on 20 April 1916 the C in C ordered No. 3 Section of the Canal Defences to clear the Qatia district of the indigenous population and place them in 'a concentration camp' at El Salhia.¹⁹ The wisdom of this decision seemed to have been confirmed by subsequent events at the battle of Qatia on 23 April 1916. For one thing, later evidence suggested that the local Bedouin who had been allowed into the Yeomanry camps before the battle actually passed vital

17 Establishment of an Arab Bureau in Cairo 7 Jan. 1916, FO 882/2/116772.

18 Hogarth to Falls 29 Nov. 1915, CAB 45/79.

19 GHQ to No. 3 Section Canal Defences 20 Apr. 1916, WO 95/4362.

information to the attacking forces, while the Turks even disguised some of their agents as Sinai tribesmen.²⁰ Part of Kress von Kressenstein's force which attacked Qatia consisted of Arab irregulars; although some of them fought with reckless courage, the British were, to say the least, unimpressed with their behaviour after the engagement, because they stripped the bodies of the dead Yeomanry.²¹ According to information available to the EEF the Turks had 600 - 800 Arab volunteers from Medina with them at Qatia.²² Impressed by these facts, Murray informed Robertson that the enemy had armed up to 4,000 Bedouin Arabs and 'although their fighting value may not be very good, they are atill... a force to be reckoned with as they are invaluable guides in the desert.'²³

Events at Qatia undoubtedly made many of Murray's staff hostile towards the Sinai Bedouin, and they gradually became less and less tolerant towards them. From now on these tribesmen would be rounded up before any battle, as indeed they were prior to the engagement at Rafah in January 1917, to prevent them leaking information to the enemy. Even wells in the Sinai had to be guarded by the EEF to keep Bedouin patrols away from them.²⁴ Nevertheless, the nomads continued to violate British dead, even to the extent of digging up their recently-buried bodies and then stripping them naked!²⁵ By January 1917 many officers were determined to hit these tribesmen wherever and whenever it was possible, as Lynden-

20 Chaytor to Director, Historical Section 22 Oct. 1925, CAB 45/78.

21 Qatia Patrol Report 25 Apr. 1916, WO 95/4520.

22 W.D. G.S. Intelligence Section EEF 25 Apr. 1916, WO 157/703.

23 Murray to Robertson 1 May 1916, BM Add MS 52461.

24 McGrigor Diary 9 Nov. 1916.

25 Ibid., 13 Jan. 1917.

Bell admitted to Chetwode:

The fellows... that I do want to get on to are those Bedouins, and I hope we shall be able to do it effectively when we get to Rafah. Of course, a great many of these fellows are fighting with a rope round their necks, and I suppose intend doing as much damage as they can before we do them in. 26

Because of this hostility, officers of the EEF actually applauded Turkish deserters who shot Arabs on their way to the British lines. GHQ realized that they could not themselves indiscriminately shoot tribesmen, for at some stage in the future it was hoped to win their support.²⁷ There can be little doubt that adverse experiences with nomadic tribesmen in the Sinai helped to poison the minds of many regular soldiers in the EEF towards the activities of any Arab forces throughout the war.

Remarkably, however, GHQ did consider using Arabs in co-operation with the main EEF forces in the Sinai. Early in May 1916 such a suggestion was raised and even carefully examined but was finally rejected because 'those Arabs whose services we could procure in this country would be so unreliable that they might well prove a source of danger rather than of security.'²⁸ Yet this was not the end of the matter; nor was Sir Archibald irrevocably opposed to such action, for when a similar recommendation was made later in the month GHQ admitted that the C in C had 'no objection in principle' if the various problems of unreliable tribesmen and a shortage of experienced British officers could be overcome.²⁹ Murray's true attitude to this subject became apparent during the

26 Lynden-Bell to Chetwode 18 Jan. 1917, Chetwode papers PWCI/Folder 1.

27 Fergusson to D'Ewes 22 Jan. 1917, Fergusson papers DEF/4.

28 GHQ to GOC 9 Army Corps 4 May 1916, WO 95/4362.

29 GHQ to GOC Western Frontier Force 12 May 1916, WO 95/4362.

final days of his command in Egypt when he suggested to the War Office that Arab scouts could be recruited from the Sudan for use in the Sinai and Palestine. The intention was to employ these men in protecting outlying wells and special locations as well as in small raids against enemy communications and isolated units. In conclusion the departing C in C strongly urged this fresh initiative: 'I am convinced value of this small force of Arab camel men... would be considerable. Their presence, moreover, should produce good effect on local Arabs.'³⁰

PLANS FOR ACTION AT AQABA AND RABEGH

Sherif Hussein finally decided to revolt openly against Turkish rule on 5 June 1916 in the Hejaz. This official revolt against Turkish forces placed unexpected strains upon the strategy which had already been outlined for the EEF. Indeed, it was to put Murray at the centre of a tug of war between the demands of Egypt and those of the rebel forces in the Hejaz - a struggle that extended to London and divided the War Committee and then the War Cabinet for weeks.

Murray's involvement in these matters can be easily explained. The EEF, with its GHQ in Egypt, represented the closest British forces to the Hejaz and the Sherif, as we have already seen, had frequently requested an operation in Syria to cover his revolt when it ultimately started. The British had explained that they could not possibly conduct such a major amphibious attack. But

³⁰ GHQ Egypt to W.O. 14 June 1917 and GHQ Egypt to W.O. 23 June 1917, L/P&S/11/123/2097.

there was another option open to them. The remaining Turkish forces in the Hejaz were dependent for their communications upon the Hejaz railway, which ran from Damascus to Medina via Maan - a town 60 miles to the north-east of the port of Aqaba in the Sinai. If British troops took Aqaba they could disrupt the Turks' line of communication in the Hejaz and answer the Sherif's demand for some kind of military action by Britain to assist his struggle against the Ottoman overlord.³¹ The CIGS took up this line of reasoning with Murray on 14 June 1916; he wanted the EEF to consider the feasibility of occupying the town in the autumn as part of a general advance across the Sinai centred on El Arish on the Mediterranean coast, because such an action would 'undoubtedly encourage' the Sherif and might lead to a 'very desirable extension' of the Arab movement.³² But Sir Archibald was none too enthusiastic at this prospect, for in his memorandum of 15 February 1916 he had plainly stated that if El Arish was captured no further positions needed to be held permanently in the Sinai.³³ Mention of Aqaba added a whole new dimension to the subject of future operations in the Sinai, and he regarded it as a separate issue entirely: 'I would only occupy it if it is considered advisable for the furtherance of the Arab movement.'³⁴ There seemed to be something of a misunderstanding between Robertson and Murray, for the CIGS now talked of a 'forward movement' to El Arish and Aqaba as if the two tasks could be undertaken together

³¹ McMahon to Grey 1 June 1916, FO 800/48.

³² CIGS to GOC in C Egypt 14 June 1916, WO 106/715.

³³ GOC in C Egypt to CIGS 15 Feb. 1916, WO 95/4361.

³⁴ GOC in C Egypt to CIGS 26 June 1916, WO 106/715.

as part of the EEF's occupation of the Sinai. His impression may have been strengthened by Murray's mention of the settlement of Nekhl in his original memorandum of February; this lay north-west of Aqaba in the heart of the Sinai, though the two were connected by one of the main routes across the peninsula. Robertson suggested its occupation along with Aqaba as having a possible influence upon the Sherif in his communication of 14 June 1916; it is a logical conclusion, therefore, that, at this point at least, he envisaged an overland advance upon Aqaba, since Nekhl would be the obvious half-way position in any march from the Suez Canal.

However, Sir Archibald rather quashed this idea by explaining that

it was not convenient for him to take Nekhl.³⁵ But the CIGS was not to be denied so easily. On 28 June 1916 he still talked of a 'general advance' on El Arish and Aqaba, but added a significant suggestion - Murray was to consult the Royal Navy over the occupation of El Arish.³⁶ If Nekhl were not to be occupied - and Robertson made no mention of it again - naval assistance would be required to get British troops to Aqaba. The occupation of this town was starting to assume the appearance of a separate operation all of its own, even if there were those in London who still failed to grasp this important fact.³⁷ Murray, on the other hand, believed that any attempt to seize Aqaba might develop into a serious diversion from his desire to capture El Arish and thus secure Egypt, as well as a strain on the limited resources of the EEF, which could not be pulled two ways at once. But he was

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ CIGS to GOC in C Egypt 28 June 1916, WO 106/715.

³⁷ 'The Sherif of Mecca and the Arab movement.' General Staff. 1 July 1916, CAB 42/16/1. This memorandum talks of El Arish and Aqaba as if they were joint operations.

prepared to help the Arabs - and the calls for action of some sort had reached a shrill note early in July.³⁸

Murray did not waste time. He contacted Admiral Wemyss to explain that he could get a force to Aqaba only by sea and that he possessed very little information on the area; he therefore requested a seaplane reconnaissance of the town so that adequate maps could be produced from the resulting photographs.³⁹ The flight proved that Aqaba was 'entirely undefended' at that time.⁴⁰ Meanwhile, Sir Archibald explained his thinking to Robertson: 'I should like to put a small force there and to undertake a raid against the Hejaz railway to destroy a vulnerable part of the line.'⁴¹ His conception of the operation was along very limited lines, therefore. But problems were soon to arise.

There were those who had argued for a British action at Aqaba who did not see the operation as Murray did. Wingate in the Sudan, for example, had expected a far larger force that could take Maan as well and establish a permanent line of communications between the two towns, since, in his opinion, using a small force could be risky.⁴² The element of risk related to British prestige; Wingate feared that if a small force of about 200 men was defeated by the enemy, the Sudan might be adversely affected - let alone what it could do to the Arabs of the Hejaz!⁴³ Murray now found himself

38 McMahon to F.O. 10 July 1916, CAB 42/16/5.

39 Murray to Vice-Admiral, C in C East Indies 14 July 1916 and GHQ to GOC No. 1 Section Canal Defences 25 July 1916, WO 95/4364.

40 W. Benn, In the side shows (London, 1919), p.116.

41 Murray to Robertson 14 July 1916, BM Add. MS 52461.

42 Wingate to Clayton July 1916, Clayton papers 470/3/11.

43 Murray to Robertson 18 Aug. 1916, BM Add. MS 52461.

promising the Sirdar not to attempt such a venture without 'the most careful preparations and a sufficient force.'⁴⁴ But this concession created a fresh difficulty: the EEF had just confronted the Turks in a major battle at Romani in August, and could spare no men for a large-scale operation. Meanwhile, as he began to realize from Murray's telegrams that his suggestion of a move against Aqaba would not be the simple operation he had anticipated the CIGS's enthusiasm cooled. In fairly stern terms for a private letter Robertson told his subordinate that he did not wish the EEF to occupy Aqaba solely for the Sherif's sake, because the defence of Egypt needed to be kept in mind as well, and he now revealed his true feelings: 'I am averse from undertaking any further expeditions until we finish off some of the existing ones.'⁴⁵ There could be no doubt, consequently, that the CIGS feared the Aqaba scheme might turn into a major expedition.⁴⁶

Murray's enthusiasm, too, had dwindled somewhat, for he had stumbled across further complications. The nature of the terrain around Aqaba meant that he would need a special breed of camel, while unless permanent positions were taken up on the Hejaz railway the Turks would rapidly repair any damage done; worst of all, the Sherif now refused to allow him to send agents into the area - and this after an assurance that the Sherif would not object to

⁴⁴ Murray to Wingate 18 Aug. 1916, Clayton papers 470/3/35.

⁴⁵ Robertson to Murray 29 Aug. 1916, BM Add. MS 52461.

⁴⁶ 'Assistance to the Sherif' by CIGS 20 Sept. 1916, CAB 42/20/8. 'He is therefore of opinion that a landing at Akaba might develop into a serious and costly expedition... carried out with considerable force.'

British action at Aqaba.⁴⁷ It does not surprise us, therefore, to find the following comment about the Aqaba scheme in the EEF War Diary for August 1916: 'indefinitely postponed.'⁴⁸

Once more, this was not the end of the matter. Long after the military had rejected the idea others continued to broach it. For example, the India Office still expected action at Aqaba early in September 1916.⁴⁹ Other powerful voices were also starting to be raised in its favour: Sykes considered that Aqaba would make an excellent base from which to contact the Arabs, and the French had decided that they would be only too willing to see Murray in position at Aqaba.⁵⁰ Even Murray himself resurrected the subject when it suited him, tending to be somewhat ambiguous in his comments. When it was clear the CIGS had lost interest in the project Murray told him: 'I have never liked the idea of an expedition to Aqaba.'⁵¹ When he directly confronted the High Commissioner in September, however, he changed his tune: 'I have always been keen... on going to Aqaba', he claimed.⁵²

Murray's apparently ambiguous stance on possible operations at Aqaba was partly due to fresh developments in the Hejaz. Attention now shifted to a town on the coast of the Hejaz called Rabegh, 150 miles from Medina. The significance of this settlement

47 GOC in C Egypt to CIGS 15 Sept. 1916 and Egyptforce to Arbur 18 July 1916, WO 158/602. Official History, p.232 barely mentions Aqaba in this connection and suggests it was solely the Sherif's opposition that killed the scheme.

48 Summary for Aug. 1916, WO 95/4365.

49 Note by A. Hirtzel 1 Sept. 1916, L/P&S/10/600/3528.

50 War Committee meeting 1 Sept. 1916, CAB 42/19/1. Grey to Bertie 11 Sept. 1916, CAB 42/20/3.

51 GOC in C Egypt to CIGS 15 Sept. 1916, op.cit.

52 Conference held Ismailia 12 Sept. 1916, WO 156/602.

was its location, for it lay upon the most obvious route from Medina to Mecca. Now this became of vital importance, because the Turks were known to ^{be} massing troops at Medina with the intention of advancing upon Mecca, Hussein's headquarters, and crushing the Arab revolt. From now on, therefore, it seemed to many that what was at stake was not how best the British could assist or encourage the Sherif, but whether the Sherif would survive! Nor were the Arabs coy about asking for help: they had already begun to plead for troops to be sent to stiffen their forces in August; but the whole issue erupted early in September.⁵³

At a conference held at Murray's house in Ismailia on 12 September 1916 on the Sherif's current situation, the High Commissioner said he would drop the question of a landing at Aqaba but, at the same time, he 'urgently insisted' that British troops be despatched to Rabegh.⁵⁴ Grey raised the issue at the War Committee of 18 September, explaining to his colleagues that he had received a telegram from McMahon advocating the sending of an infantry brigade to the town from Egypt. The timing was unfortunate for the CIGS since he had to admit that the Aqaba scheme was not feasible at the meeting and that no brigade was available for Rabegh, so that his attitude appeared almost totally negative. Moreover, the members of the War Committee were concerned that the Sherif might collapse if he were given no support at Rabegh.⁵⁵ Yet

53 McMahon to F.O. 31 Aug. 1916, CAB 42/19/1. The initial request was for troops to be sent to Yenbo - a town to the north of Rabegh and also on the coast of the Hejaz - but this soon fell into the background.

54 Chief Egyptgorce to Chief London 12 Sept. 1916, WO 158/602.

55 War Committee meeting 18 Sept. 1916, CAB 42/20/3.

there was considerable ignorance in London as to where Rabegh actually lay: both Bonar Law and Asquith at successive War Committee meetings asked if it was on the coast, while Henry Wilson believed the town to be in the Yemen!⁵⁶

The issue was rapidly becoming a major area of concern for the strategists in London, nevertheless, and fresh arguments both for and against its execution were raised each time the matter was discussed. For example, on 25 September 1916 Robertson claimed the support of both Clayton and Sykes in his opposition to the venture, while it now came to light that Rabegh did not cover all the routes between Medina and Mecca - information which greatly reduced its strategic significance. On the other hand, Austen Chamberlain felt sure troops should be sent to Rabegh, and Paris urged this action as well.⁵⁷

The CIGS began to find himself under increased pressure in October, and he complained to Lloyd George, now the Secretary of State for War, that his position was being undermined at the War Committee because the advice of subordinate commanders was to be sought on the subject.⁵⁸ In a revealing letter to Haig, Robertson confessed that 'great pressure' had been placed upon him to send troops to the Hejaz and it was only with 'great difficulty' that he had prevented this enterprise - at least for the present.⁵⁹ Because of the strength of the opposition to Robertson's views

56 Ibid., and War Committee meeting 25 Sept. 1916, CAB 42/20/6. Henry Wilson Diary 21 Sept. 1916.

57 War Committee meeting 25 Sept. 1916, op.cit.

58 Robertson to Lloyd George 11 Oct. 1916, Robertson papers I/19/7a.

59 Robertson to Haig 16 Oct. 1916, Robertson papers I/22/83.

in London on the subject he found himself having to rely heavily upon the support of Murray in Egypt. Sir Archibald was absolutely consistent in his opposition to the proposal because it could mean reducing the number of troops available to him for his advance on El Arish. He therefore did all he could to prevent the landing, although he made sure an infantry brigade was prepared in case all his efforts ultimately failed. Murray sought the Sultan of Egypt's advice and, much to his personal satisfaction, discovered that the Egyptian leader was not in favour of action at Rabegh; the fact was soon communicated to the CIGS.⁶⁰ He also told Wingate that he opposed the landing and believed he was supported in this by the India Office.⁶¹ Surprisingly he enjoyed a certain degree of support from Wingate, who believed he understood the C in C's attitude: 'Murray is naturally opposed to reducing the troops at his disposal which, in his opinion, are inadequate for his impending advance on El Arish, and I sympathise with him to a certain extent.'⁶² These are important words, for the Sirdar was a strong advocate of action at Rabegh and support for the Arab movement, yet he could recognize validity in Murray's position. It follows, therefore, that there was considerable justice in Robertson's stance in London even if precious few of the War Committee could actually see this in September and October 1916.

Although the CIGS thought he had successfully managed to

60 Murray to Robertson 22 Sept. 1916, BM Add. MS 52462.

61 Chief Egyptforce to Sirdar 14 Oct. 1916, WO 158/602.

62 Wingate to Wilson 12 Oct. 1916, Wingate papers 141/3/45.

frustrate the Rabegh option he was not quite correct. Towards the end of October Egypt received information that a Turkish attack on Mecca could be expected in about a month's time: ^{the} matter was far from dead.⁶³ Nor had Murray been correct in his evaluation of the India Office's position, for at the end of October Austen Chamberlain, the Secretary of State, noted that he and his Office were in favour of a landing at Rabegh, although he admitted that whatever was done 'we take great risks either way.'⁶⁴ Early in November Lord Islington at the India Office urged Lloyd George to press for an occupation of Rabegh, claiming the support of the Military Secretary, General Barrow.⁶⁵ Moreover, a memorandum written by Captain Bray, who had recently been at Rabegh, advocated the occupation of the town by British troops in order to save the revolt in the Hejaz.⁶⁶ This report had been addressed to the India Office, but it was subsequently circulated to the War Committee. So intense had debate about Rabegh become in London that on 2 November 1916 Asquith suggested that the entire matter had been exaggerated.⁶⁷

A special conference was held, nevertheless, at the Foreign Office on 11 November 1916. At the meeting the CIGS made it quite clear that he wished to avoid the mistakes of the Dardanelles and Mesopotamia campaigns by undertaking an operation with insufficient

63 Sirdar to Arbur 24 Oct. 1916, WO 158/602.

64 Note by Chamberlain 29 Oct. 1916, L/MIL/5/858.

65 Islington to Lloyd George 5 Nov. 1916, Lloyd George papers E/2/8/1.

66 Report by Capt. Bray to Military Secretary, India Office. 8 Nov. 1916, CAB 42/24/8. Bray later wrote about his experiences in Arabia: see N. N. G. Bray, Shifting sands (London, 1935).

67 War Committee meeting 2 Nov. 1916, CAB 42/23/3.

strength. He therefore refused to accept that a brigade could ever be strong enough for such action. However, the various ministers present stressed the 'disastrous consequences' of the Sherif's collapse, explaining that these were far more important than any suspension of the drive towards El Arish.⁶⁸ As a result of this conference Robertson found himself directed to produce a detailed memorandum on the number of troops required for action at Rabegh. After some discussion with his deputy, during which the CIGS inflated the original estimate of troops necessary for the campaign, Robertson produced a paper arguing that 15,000 British soldiers would be needed, and that such a drain on the EEF must render the El Arish operation impossible.⁶⁹ As far as Lord Grey was concerned it had now become a straight choice between the advance to El Arish and supporting the Arabs at Rabegh. There was strong support in the War Committee for El Arish, however, and the whole business intensified interest in this most cherished of all Murray's operations in London. The CIGS was requested to write yet another paper - this time on El Arish.⁷⁰

Meanwhile, Murray took a hand in proceedings. Having received a memorandum by a certain Captain T. E. Lawrence opposing despatch of British troops to Rabegh he passed it on to London, encouraging the CIGS to read it at once.⁷¹ This report was also circulated to

68 Note by Grey 11 Nov. 1916, CAB 42/24/8.

69 Notes by Robertson on draft of memorandum, Robertson papers I/25/1a. Despatch of an Expeditionary Force to Rabegh by CIGS 13 Nov. 1916, CAB 42/24/8.

70 War Committee meeting 16 Nov. 1916, CAB 42/24/8.

71 Report from Capt. Lawrence of Intelligence Staff, Cairo 17 Nov. 1916, WO 106/1511. Chief Egyptforce to Chief London 17 Nov. 1916, WO 158/627.

the War Committee, where, according to Robertson, it made a 'great impression.'⁷² In his enthusiasm to provide the CIGS with additional ammunition with which to oppose action at Rabegh, however, Murray had acted somewhat precipitately. Although he told Wingate, with whom he was supposed to be co-ordinating action on behalf of the Arabs, that he thought he ought to inform London of the contents of this most recent paper, he did not wait for a reply before sending it, nor did he confirm that he had done so.⁷³ When Wingate's response advised against transmitting the report it was therefore too late.⁷⁴ The first Wingate learnt of these events was when the Foreign Office asked him for his opinion on Lawrence's report; he had to telegraph Murray requesting to see its contents.⁷⁵ The War Committee, realizing what had happened, instructed Robertson to rebuke Murray for 'lack of co-ordination' because the Sirdar had not seen the original telegram.⁷⁶ The C in C was stung by this complaint and excused himself by stating that since Lawrence had 'just come to me after spending several days with the Sirdar I naturally understood he was fully in possession of Lawrence's news. In fact Lawrence informed me to this effect.'⁷⁷ Officially, Wingate maintained silence about the affair, but privately he was upset by a 'want of straightness on the part of certain people who should be above that sort of thing' and would

72 Robertson to Murray 8 Dec. 1916, Robertson papers I/14/53.

73 Chief Egyptforce to Sirdar 17 Nov. 1916, WO 158/627.

74 Sirdar, Khartoum to Chief Egyptforce 18 Nov. 1916, WO 158/627. This telegram was not deciphered until 19 Nov.

75 F.O. to Sirdar 20 Nov. 1916, FO 371/2776/80053.

76 Chief London to Chief Egyptforce 22 Nov. 1916, WO 158/604.

77 Chief Egyptforce to Chief London 23 Nov. 1916, WO 158/604.

not have been convinced if he had seen Murray's explanation, for he was quite sure why this had all taken place:

The whole point of this little 'storm in a teacup' was evidently an attempt to get out of any responsibility for sending troops to the Hejaz and basing it on L's views that the landing of Christian troops in any numbers at Rabegh would at once cause Feisal's Arabs to throw in their hands and return to their homes. ⁷⁸

But all Murray's efforts could not prevent the new War Cabinet deciding on 9 December 1916, after a discussion of 'considerable length', to order Sir Archibald to prepare a brigade for Rabegh.⁷⁹ The C in C had anticipated this and admitted to Lynden-Bell only two days earlier that they ought to be ready to lose one or two brigades.⁸⁰ On 15 December it was reported at the War Cabinet that the Sherif had officially requested a brigade be made ready at Port Said or Suez for despatch to Rabegh.⁸¹ London greeted this definite decision with some relief.⁸² It saved the British from more embarrassment than they had anticipated, for the French had offered some of their Senegalese troops if Murray refused point blank to send any men. As these soldiers were fetish worshippers *they* were considered to be 'even more repugnant' to the Arabs than any Christian troops would be near to the holy places of Islam.⁸³

On 4 January 1917 the new High Commissioner in Egypt, Wingate,

78 Wingate to Wilson 23 Nov. 1916, Wingate papers 143/6/52.

79 War Cabinet meeting 9 Dec. 1916, CAB 23/1.

80 Note for CGS by Murray 7 Dec. 1916, WO 158/627.

81 War Cabinet meeting 15 Dec. 1916, CAB 23/1.

82 Chamberlain to Curzon 16 Dec. 1916, MSS Eur F 112/116.

83 Minute by Clark 15 Dec. 1916, FO 371/2776/253644.

received what appeared to be a request from the Sherif for troops to be sent to Rabegh at once.⁸⁴ Murray afterwards contacted the CIGS asking for his sanction while recording his own objection to the decision which would, he claimed, have 'an unfortunate effect on my own operations now progressing so well.'⁸⁵ He also wrote to Wingate telling him what a 'blow' this most recent news had been to him.⁸⁶ The comment in his diary, short and to the point as always, reveals the extent of the C in C's anger: 'much annoyed.'⁸⁷ Events now took an unexpected turn. Colonel Wilson, organizing British assistance to the Arabs in the Hejaz, warned Cairo not to send any troops simply on the strength of one telephone call (which was all the message of 4 January 1917 had been) but to wait until the Sherif had presented a formal request in writing.⁸⁸ On the strength of this telegram Wingate decided to delay despatch of the troops for a day in the hope that confirmation would be duly received from the Sherif.⁸⁹ Meanwhile, Murray was informed by the CIGS that the War Cabinet had decided not to allow the troops to be sent unless a formal request from Hussein reached the British.⁹⁰ As it never arrived the entire affair came to an end, for the Sherif finally admitted he did not want any troops landed in the Hejaz at present.⁹¹ According to the India Office Murray had

84 Pearson, Jeddah to Arbur for Sir R. Wingate, Cairo 4 Jan. 1917, WO 158/627.

85 Chief Egyptforce to Chief London 5 Jan. 1917, WO 158/627.

86 Murray to Wingate 5 Jan. 1917, WO 158/627.

87 Murray Diary 5 Jan. 1917.

88 Wilson, Jeddah to Arbur, Cairo 7 Jan. 1917, WO 158/627.

89 Wingate to Murray 8 Jan. 1917, WO 158/627.

90 Chief London to Chief Egyptforce 8 Jan. 1917, WO 158/627.

91 Wingate to F.O. 12 Jan. 1917, WO 158/627.

prevented London from becoming embroiled in a very messy business:

But for the fact that Sir Archibald Murray was sufficiently obstinate not to move without confirmation from the W.O., H.M.G. would not have known that this 'formal application' was nothing more than a telephone message in which the whole responsibility was thrown on us! 92

The C in C's attitude had been vindicated, therefore, for he had actually suggested to Wingate on 5 January 1917 that the Sherif would be more or less 'obliged' to accept this assistance because of the way in which the British authorities had handled the matter.⁹³ Moreover, the value of the EEF's operations in Sinai to the Arabs had finally been proven beyond a doubt, for the success at Rafah apparently caused the Turks to withdraw their advanced positions past Medina, and with them both the threat to Mecca and the need for action at Rabegh.⁹⁴ From now on Murray's advances in Syria stopped any further Turkish moves towards Mecca, and the Rabegh question was resolved.

THE EEF AND DIRECT SUPPORT FOR THE SHERIF AFTER JUNE 1916

The outbreak of the Sherif's revolt did not merely place an additional strain upon Murray's strategic designs in the Sinai; it also created a considerable degree of administrative confusion in Egypt that, in turn, caused not a little tension between the various authorities both inside and outside the country involved in the affairs of the revolt. And yet the C in C's initial response to events in the Hejaz early in June was most positive.

92 Note by Hirtzel 15 Jan. 1917, L/P&S/11/116/243.

93 Murray to Wingate, op.cit.

94 Wingate to F.O. 24 Jan. 1917, L/P&S/11/118/585.

He instructed his staff to ensure that 'every possible assistance is to be given to the Sherif' and at the end of June he could claim 'so far every demand... has been complied with in full by the Army - at once.'⁹⁵ These demands consisted largely of requests for arms and ammunition; but Murray's interest extended beyond this even in these early days of the revolt. He actually offered to undertake the military supervision of affairs in the Hejaz, although this suggestion was rejected by the War Office because there were so many different interests involved in the Arab movement. Sir Archibald's motive for this suggestion was his well-founded fear of administrative chaos, as he explained to Wingate: 'I foresee that these operations may be long, costly, and will increase demands on us... I think some controlling organisation must be set up so as to keep the threads together and to avoid friction.'⁹⁶ In fact, a logical system of control was desperately needed, for the High Commissioner, the Foreign Office, the Sirdar, Murray, the new Arab Bureau, the War Office and the India Office were all wrapped up in this affair. So confusing was the situation that Mark Sykes felt that, with the possible exception of the ancient Polish constitution, the system of command in Arabia was the most complicated ever produced!⁹⁷

At first McMahon seemed to believe that Hussein ought to be left to run his own campaign apart from the odd piece of advice from himself every so often about general lines of action.⁹⁸ The

95 W.D. Intelligence Section EEF 10 and 30 June 1916, WO 157/705.

96 Chief Egyptforce to Sirdar 25 June 1916, WO 158/602.

97 Appreciation of attached Arabian Report No. XIV by Sykes
15 Oct. 1916, CAB 17/177,

98 McMahon to Murray 20 June 1916, FO 141/738/3818.

High Commissioner was no doubt thinking in terms of the negotiations he had been conducting with the Sherif before June; however the situation had now altered, and after discussion with Murray he seemed to grasp this, for he and the C in C now recommended that Wingate in the Sudan ought to organize 'the general direction of military matters connected with our assistance to the Sherif.'⁹⁹ Ultimately Wingate did take over this ~~made~~ of the revolt, but only after a delay and some confusion, as a letter from him to Murray in the middle of August indicates: 'I am somewhat surprised to learn from your letter that the operations in, and arrangements for, the Hejaz are in no way under your direction. As you are aware, they are not under mine either.'¹⁰⁰ Such confusion led to administrative friction in Egypt. Murray discovered that members of his own Intelligence Department had become involved in the supervision of operations in the Hejaz without his knowledge. The entire incident may have been caused by a misunderstanding, but it annoyed the C in C.¹⁰¹ Bad feeling resulted, which Murray took steps to prevent recurring by warning his staff not to assist the Arab Bureau; this instruction was later modified, however, so that Lieutenant T. E. Lawrence could help the Bureau 'in all but where action is necessary' while Hogarth was given permission to consult the EEF's Intelligence Department.¹⁰²

The impression that Sir Archibald was hostile towards the Arab Bureau, and therefore to the revolt itself, seemed to be further confirmed in the minds of some by his behaviour during a

99 High Commissioner to Sirdar 28 June 1916, WO 158/602.
 100 Wingate to Murray 10 Aug. 1916, Wingate papers 139/2/102.
 101 McMahon to Murray 20 June 1916, FO 141/738/3818.
 102 Parker to Wingate 6 July 1916, Wingate papers 138/3/69.

conference at his house on 12 September 1916. At this meeting the C in C adopted a firm line, refusing to countenance the sending of a British force to Rabegh; unfortunately, while doing so he forcefully criticized the Sirdar's representative with Hussein, Colonel Wilson, whose telegram, he claimed, demonstrated 'a want of military knowledge.'¹⁰³ Wilson was deeply hurt, and later told Wingate that the C in C had behaved in 'a damned caddish manner' and that there had been 'a very considerable lot of mud slung at me.'¹⁰⁴ Wingate's temperate reply expressed some sympathy for Sir Archibald's position: 'I dare say both Murray and Robertson could criticize with perfect justice a good many of our military actions and conclusions.' He also realized that behind the outburst lay a clash between the C in C and the High Commissioner, and not simply hostility to Arab operations.¹⁰⁵ The belief that Murray was opposed to the Arab Bureau and its works was consequently quite false for by November Clayton was describing him as 'entirely sympathetic' to the Bureau itself, and explained that the division between this new body and the Intelligence Department 'was bound to lead to small difficulties at first, but these are I hope over and done with.'¹⁰⁶

The earliest problems the British experienced with Hussein were largely due to the latter's overconfidence and ambition. He wanted, it seemed, to form a regular army and invade Syria as soon as possible.¹⁰⁷ McMahon thought this foolish, fearing the Sherif

¹⁰³ Conference held at Ismailia 12 Sept. 1916, WO 158/602.

¹⁰⁴ Wilson to Wingate 20 Sept. 1916, Wingate papers 140/5/32.

¹⁰⁵ Wingate to Wilson 29 Sept. 1916, Wingate papers 140/8/101.

¹⁰⁶ Clayton to Wingate 27 Nov. 1916, Wingate papers 143/6/88.

¹⁰⁷ HMS 'Dufferin' to Wingate 2 July 1916, Wingate papers 138/2/15.

might spread his forces over too wide an area.¹⁰⁸ But the motivation behind this prudent advice was not purely military: the British also feared that an invasion of Syria by Hejaz Arabs could lead to 'serious complications' with the French, for whom Hussein had little love.¹⁰⁹ In fact, a French military mission to the Hejaz arrived in Egypt in September under a Colonel Brémond and Murray explained to the CIGS that he feared 'politically we shall have to eventually pay a very high price' for all material assistance given to the Arabs by Paris.¹¹⁰ The British remained suspicious of French intentions in the Hejaz and believed that they did not want Hussein to do too well in case this precipitated a revolt in Syria and so render France's claims in that region harder to enforce.¹¹¹ Murray, who was remarkably astute politically for a general, knew of these French designs and did not hesitate to pass on his knowledge to Robertson in London.¹¹²

The Sherif's ambitions had little chance of ever becoming realities in the summer of 1916 since there was no possibility of direct support from the EEF during these months. This very fact tended to make GHQ believe that a mistake had been made; Hussein had been encouraged to act too early, they felt, before serious operations in the Sinai could be executed to assist him.¹¹³ The belief that events in the Hejaz might become a fiasco into which the EEF would be drawn influenced Murray, as did the very actions of the Arabs themselves. The C in C tended to be scathing in his

108 McMahon to Murray 20 June 1916, op.cit.

109 Arbur to Sudan 6 July 1916, Wingate papers 138/3/60.

110 Chief Egypt to CIGS 6 Sept. 1916, FO 371/2779/178902.

111 Col. Wilson to Wingate 10 Feb. 1917, FO 371/3044/4085.

112 GOC in C Egypt to CIGS 5 Feb. 1917, WO 33/905.

113 Parker to Wingate 6 July 1916, op.cit.

opinion of Hussein himself, accusing him of having 'muddled the business' and ridiculing his request for aircraft since he clearly understood nothing about them.¹¹⁴ Moreover, although he was lavish in his supply of munitions to the Sherif, by October he did not feel he had gained much by this: 'What the Arabs do with the small arms ammunition passes my knowledge. They have had about twenty million rounds and I don't suppose have killed or wounded 2,000 Turks and now they ask for many millions more.'¹¹⁵ Nonetheless, he saw value in these muddled operations in Arabia and he was prepared to admit that he would pay the Sherif £10,000 a month just to keep the Hejaz rail north of Medina cut; he even offered to supply explosives and train men to make all of this possible.¹¹⁶ His desire to keep this vital line of communication closed reflected his concern about the activities of the Turkish Hejaz Expeditionary Force at Medina, which the Arabs had been unable to take despite the capture of Mecca. There were thought to be as many as 15,000 enemy troops in the Hejaz: if they decided to evacuate Arabia they could create problems on Murray's right flank as he advanced to El Arish and beyond. To tie these troops to the Hejaz was all that GHQ implicitly asked of Hussein in the early months of the revolt.

As the EEF's operations towards El Arish began to develop, however, so rekindled enthusiasm for Hussein and his prospects started to emerge in British military circles as the possibility of direct co-operation between the EEF and the Arabs seemed likely. Early in October Sykes communicated his hopes to

114 Murray to Robertson 1 Sept. 1916, Robertson papers I/32/47.

115 Murray to Wingate 18 Oct. 1916, Wingate papers 141/4/24.

116 Ibid.

the War Office; he argued that if a serious offensive into Syria were begun by the EEF in the winter of 1916-1917 and managed to contain the bulk of the Ottoman forces, then attempts could be made to arm and raise in revolt the Syrian Arabs, such as Nuri Shalaan, the Druse and the Maronites.¹¹⁷ Robertson, apparently encouraged by Sykes' views and Murray's advances in the Sinai, wrote to Grey suggesting that once the EEF reached El Arish the time would be 'a favourable moment for raising the various elements in Syria who are discontented with Turkish rule.' He also suggested that since this would involve some action in the French sphere of influence Paris ought to be informed to see if she would be prepared to help.¹¹⁸ Paris agreed to do so, but added that the time was not ripe for such action and that the Allies ought to concentrate their efforts elsewhere.¹¹⁹ Sykes was not to be frustrated by such a lukewarm response; he now estimated precise numbers of 'disaffected armed bodies' in Syria including 22,000 Druse, 12,000 Maronites and 25,000 Anazeh tribesmen led by Nuri Shalaan. He argued that these men would act if Sir Archibald delivered a powerful blow at the enemy.¹²⁰

This fresh enthusiasm for a revolt in Syria had partly been engendered by new reports that, like the Sherif, Nuri Shalaan had openly revolted. Because false stories of this chief's decision to

117 Sykes to Director Military Operations, W.O. 4 Oct. 1916, Sykes papers.

118 Robertson to Grey 5 Oct. 1916, FO 371/2775/199608.

119 Note from French Ambassador 11 Oct. 1916, CAB 42/21/5.

120 Memorandum on the French reply of 5 Oct. 1916 regarding co-operation in Syria, by Sykes 18 Oct. 1916, CAB 42/22/3.

rebel had circulated before in Egypt, the Arab Bureau was sceptical about these most recent reports in early November.¹²¹ News of Druse unrest was also available, but separate information tended to suggest that these tribesmen had in fact been terrorised by the Turks.¹²² What Cairo was picking up, in fact, was evidence of 'an anarchical state of affairs' in eastern Syria as Arabs and Druse continued their prewar habit of attacking isolated Turkish posts; there was 'no organized rebellion on a large scale.'¹²³ In the Hejaz, however, Faisal seems to have been impressed by this news, as he was reported to entertain ambitions to contact Nuri Shalaan and move into Syria.¹²⁴

In London, meanwhile, as the next step to be followed by the EEF beyond El Arish came under scrutiny early in December the support of disaffected elements in Syria became an important aspect of planning for any future advance into Palestine. The planners at the War Office knew that taking El Arish itself would have little effect in Syria; what was needed was an advance to the Jaffa-Jerusalem-Jericho line, from where contact could be established with Bedouin around Amman and Es Salt and Nuri Shalaan so that a general rebellion could be raised in the region.¹²⁵ Robertson was also impressed with the possibility of an uprising in Syria, but

121 Note on Nuri Shalaan by Arab Bureau 6 Nov. 1916, WO 158/603.

122 Appreciation of attached Arabian Report 8 Nov. 1916 by Sykes, CAB 17/177. Report of an inhabitant of Athlit, Syria 1 Nov. 1916, L/MIL/5/735.

123 W.D. Intelligence Section EEF 17 and 21 Nov. 1916, WO 157/710.

124 Notes on the military situation by Lt.-Col. Wilson 4 Nov. 1916, WO 158/604.

125 Memorandum on El Arish operations 10 Dec. 1916, WO 106/715.

he remained realistic as to its extent and strength:

There is good reason to believe that the population in Syria will be willing enough to rise against the Turks, but we could not rely on their assuming active hostilities until they were in a position to receive direct support from us. They will probably rise behind us and not in front of us. 126

As the CIGS outlined the chance of an offensive towards Jerusalem he probably better than anybody else calculated the true strength and capabilities of anti-Turkish feeling in Syria. The War Office also believed that Arab co-operation could help Murray by reducing the number of units he would need to hold back from the front line to cover his lines of communication.¹²⁷

Enthusiasm for co-operation with Arabs and the other peoples of Syria also influenced the EEF in December. Murray informed the CIGS that he thought the Syrians might rise if he reached Beersheba as a result of action beyond El Arish.¹²⁸ Eastern Force HQ was also interested in any Arab response to their actions after the occupation of El Arish and it seems that the cavalry raids at Magdhaba and Rafah were designed partly to make an impression upon the Arabs of southern Syria.¹²⁹

Murray's attitude to all these events is interesting and worthy of some note. His opinion of the military value of the Sherif's forces remained unflattering; he explained to the CIGS: 'it is not probable if the Arabs are worth anything as soldiers,

126 Note on a proposal to undertake a campaign in Palestine during the winter months with the object of capturing Jerusalem, by CIGS 29 Dec. 1916, WO 106/715.

127 Note on proposed operations on the Eastern Frontier of Egypt 12 Dec. 1916, WO 106/715.

128 Murray to CIGS 10 Dec. 1916, WO 106/715.

129 Dawnay to GOC Desert Column 18 Dec. 1916, WO 95/4449.

which, except for the purposes of guerilla warfare, I confess, seems doubtful.'¹³⁰ His was, in fact, an accurate assessment of Hussein's men, who were quite incapable of facing a trained enemy in open warfare; this shortcoming was reflected in their inability to capture Medina and their lack of belief in their capacity to defend Mecca without possible British support at Rabegh. If contact could be established, however, the C in C saw real possibilities in co-operation with the Arabs of eastern Syria. In November, therefore, as news of Nuri Shalaan's supposed uprising reached GHQ he made a most imaginative suggestion. In a telegram to the CIGS he recommended establishing temporary air strips in the Arab chief's territory so that 'heavy weight carrying machines' could strike at the Hejaz railway nearby in conjunction with local Arab levies organized by British officers.¹³¹ It was decided that the best location for a landing site was at Jauf, east of Maan, from which strip aircraft could control a vast stretch of country even as far as Aleppo, with the possibility of making aerial contact with the British forces in Mesopotamia.¹³² As Cairo had no idea where Nuri Shalaan actually was the Sherif had to be asked for information of the nomad's location.¹³³ Meanwhile, the French had got wind of the scheme after Grey asked if they would object to operations in Nuri Shalaan's territory. Murray was somewhat bemused, therefore, when the French Military Attaché in Egypt asked to see him and offered to help his operation with planes,

¹³⁰ Murray to Robertson 12 Dec. 1916, Robertson papers I/14/60.

¹³¹ GOC in C Egypt to CIGS 8 Nov. 1916, WO 33/905.

¹³² Note by Clayton 11 Nov. 1916, WO 158/626.

¹³³ Arbur to Wingate 8 Nov. 1916, WO 158/603.

arms and subsidies.¹³⁴ There were more serious complications than this to contend with. The EEF remained desperately short of planes and was unlikely to obtain the twelve heavy bombers that the C in C had requested from the CIGS, for the demands of France were sure to receive precedence in such matters. Moreover, as it turned out, the tribes around Jauf were actually still pro-Turk, a fact which made it difficult to contact Nuri Shalaan via the Sherif, let alone get the necessary equipment to him from there, as had been proposed.¹³⁵

Ultimately the entire scheme simply depended on too many imponderables, and came to nothing. It remains of importance, however, because of the evidence it affords of Murray's enthusiasm for any co-operation with the Arabs that could provide direct assistance to his forces in the Sinai and Syria. Indeed, this always remained the C in C's basic attitude: he would supply all he could in the way of equipment to the Hejaz, but if ^{he} were able to foster Arab action on his forces' right flank then he was prepared to act himself. The Jauf scheme did not disappear entirely; it re-emerged in the form of a plan to establish a landing-strip at Aqaba in January 1917.¹³⁶

In spite of this less than encouraging experience, Murray was still confident about Arab support, especially when the agreed winter offensive by the EEF finally began, as he informed the CIGS in February:

It is not at all unlikely that if the war should

¹³⁴ Chief Egyptforce to Chief London 12 Nov. 1916, WO 95/4366.

¹³⁵ Note by A. Hirtzel 11 May 1917, L/P&S/11/123/2046.

¹³⁶ Wingate to Murray 22 Jan. 1917, Wingate papers 145/1/61.

continue after the autumn that the Egyptian Expeditionary Force, with the Arabs working in conjunction, will surely sweep the Turks right out of Palestine and thus threaten their communications with Mesopotamia. 137

In the meantime he hoped that as he began his advance into Syria this would assist the Hejaz Arabs, so that 'I may yet see them in force in the neighbourhood of Maan - an additional security to southern Sinai.'¹³⁸ The C in C, therefore, was coaxing the Arabs forward gradually in the hope that even the Sherif's men might soon be able to assist him directly. In Egypt at the same time steps were taken to establish an Intelligence service in Syria with its base at Kerak.¹³⁹ However, events in Syria were soon to overtake these plans, for the first battle at Gaza and then the complete failure at the same place in April meant that the question of Arab support rather fell into the background from the end of March until the end of April, at least as far as the EEF was concerned. Nevertheless, on 11 March 1917 Murray informed Robertson that he hoped to get to the Gaza-Beersheba line as soon as he could in order to raise the southern Syrians and also help the Sherif. This seemed of added importance at the time, because there had been reports that the Turks intended to evacuate Medina and return to Syria with 12,000 men; if Hussein could be encouraged, therefore, the C in C hoped he would prevent this move through attacks upon the Hejaz railway.¹⁴⁰ No such move was made by the Turks at Medina, however, so that the Sherif had proved his worth by tying these troops to the Hejaz.

137 Murray to Robertson 11 Feb. 1917, BM Add. MS 52462.

138 Murray to Robertson 26 Feb. 1917, BM Add. MS 52462.

139 W.D. Intelligence Department, Cairo HQ 8, 9, 17, 23 and 24 Feb. 1917, WO 157/712.

140 Murray to Robertson 11 Mar. 1917, BM Add. MS 52462.

PLANNING TO SEIZE SYRIA BY ARAB ACTION AFTER THE SECOND BATTLE OF GAZA

The second defeat at Gaza was in many ways a turning-point as far as the EEF's policy towards the various Arab tribes was concerned. Prior to it attention had been centred to a great extent, as we have already noticed, upon the varied population of Syria behind the enemy lines, which, it was hoped, would assist any British advance. The conclusive failure at Gaza, however, forced an urgent reappraisal of this strategy. It was realized that the Arabs of western Palestine were now less likely to think highly of British military prowess and correspondingly more open to Turkish propaganda and overtures of assistance.¹⁴¹

Mark Sykes appreciated this altered situation. He argued that if the EEF's policy was no longer to operate on a grand offensive scale then all projects involving Arab activities in Syria had to be dropped. He feared that the Turks might turn on the people of Syria thus making Great Britain 'morally responsible' for any massacres that might eventuate, since he - and others - had deliberately sought to foment unrest there.¹⁴² Nevertheless, Sykes had not capitulated; his tactics changed to meet fresh realities. Since the populations of urban Syria were vulnerable, British attention would now return solely to those groups who were 'strong enough to stand by themselves', i.e. the Arabs in the Hejaz, already in revolt, of course; the Druse in the Hauran mountains; and the nomadic tribes of the Syrian desert, largely under the

¹⁴¹ Australian Official History, p.359.

¹⁴² Sykes to F.O. 24 Apr. 1917, FO 371/3052/84226.

influence of Nuri Shalaan.¹⁴³ Efforts would be made from now on, therefore, to use these three groupings against the Turks even without a substantial offensive from the EEF.

Prince Feisal, commander of Hussein's northern army in the Hejaz, had for some time harboured desires to march north into Syria to liberate Damascus for the Arabs. Although certain of his British advisers had sought to confine him to 'local ambitions' he had nevertheless 'from somewhere... developed very wide ideas.'¹⁴⁴ Feisal was encouraged by the deputations he was receiving from the tribes to the north who promised him allegiance and support. During March the British had been cool about such ideas because of their fears of a Turkish evacuation of Medina. By the end of April, however, it became clear that this danger was receding.¹⁴⁵ A plan began to crystallise, therefore, by which the Hejaz railway could be disabled and, at the same time, a serious move into Syria attempted.

Feisal's initial ideas were two: first, to move north up the Hejaz railway with the ultimate aim of taking Maan and using Aqaba as a base; or, secondly, to send a small force into the Druse mountains, from which point - with Druse support and that of the Syrian nomads to the east - he could attack the railway between Damascus and Maan.¹⁴⁶ Although it was made clear to Feisal that

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Capt. Joyce to Col. Wilson 1 Apr. 1917, FO 886/6. It would seem quite likely that a certain T. E. Lawrence may well have been responsible for these 'very wide ideas'!

¹⁴⁵ Clayton to DMI London 28 Apr. 1917, FO 882/6/117354.

¹⁴⁶ Note on information received from Col. Newcombe by Clayton 5 Apr. 1917, WO 158/606.

'the business which is already in hand' - the defeat of the Turks in the Hejaz - should take first place, his plan was not dismissed.¹⁴⁷ It gradually developed into a grand strategic enterprise for the entire Hejaz campaign: Hussein's various Arab armies were all to cut the Hejaz railway once and for all, so it was hoped, totally isolating Fakri Pasha and his Turkish forces at Medina from Syria. Feisal's role in this plan would be to capture El Ula, while Sheikh Auda Abu Tiyyeh of the eastern Howeitat and Captain Lawrence were to start for the area east of Maan in order to capture that town and Aqaba. Only when El Ula was secure and Medina captured would Feisal himself move north.¹⁴⁸ The British hoped for much from this 'ambitious plan': 'If the plan of operations outlined... materialises, it should prove of considerable assistance to the British Army in Palestine.'¹⁴⁹

The plan received support in Egypt, as well. At a meeting in Cairo on 12 May 1917 Wilson argued that 'Feisal should now be encouraged to proceed to Hama and instigate raids... in the neighbourhood of the Turkish lines of communication as far north as possible'; he even suggested that these plans be 'hurried forward' irrespective of the planned operations in the Hejaz designed to isolate and capture Medina.¹⁵⁰ Since any activities by Feisal in the Maan, Deraa or Hama area would fall into the EEF's domain the conference decided to seek General Murray's support.

147 Ibid.

148 Note on the proposed military plan of operations of the Arab armies by Lt.-Col. Wilson 1 May 1917, FO 882/6/117354. A date was even set for this operation - 18 May - although Wilson was somewhat sceptical about forces being ready by then.

149 Ibid.

150 Note of a meeting at the Residency, Cairo, on 12 May 1917, Wingate papers 145/6/61.

Murray's reaction could not have been more favourable: he had, after all, been considering how to use the Arabs in conjunction with his forces in this very region in 1916 and 1917. He was therefore rather surprised that it might be thought that he would not approve: 'Of course I approve of this action,' he wrote, 'It was my suggestion.'¹⁵¹ In a letter to Lord Hardinge commenting on the affair, Wingate correctly described Murray's thinking on the subject:

Sir A. Murray is in entire concurrence with this policy which will, I think, prove helpful to him now that his forces are hung up indefinitely opposite Gaza where there is no doubt the Turks are collecting considerable reinforcements. ¹⁵²

Although the starting date for the general offensive in the Hejaz passed without any action, by June there was still a good deal of optimism that the Arabs could really achieve something which might be of tangible benefit to the EEF. For example, intelligence sources suggested that only a railway battalion covered the line between Damascus and Maan, rendering it vulnerable to any attack. It was also reported that there were up to 10,000 deserters from the Turkish army hiding in the Jebel Druse area and at Nablus waiting to be organized, armed and led against the Turks.¹⁵³ With information as encouraging as this flooding into Egypt plans for Arab operations became still more grandiose. It was now suggested that Feisal and a few hundred trained Arabs should 'start the Revolt in Syria' from the vicinity of the Jebel

¹⁵¹ Note by Murray 14 May 1917 and Note for CGS by Lloyd on the conference 12 May 1917, WO 158/606.

¹⁵² Wingate to Hardinge 15 May 1917, Wingate papers 145/6/70.

¹⁵³ Clayton to DMI London 2 June 1917, FO 882/6.

Druse.¹⁵⁴

These plans had their critics, however. Clayton pointed out that if Feisal wished for a secure line of communications between himself and his small force to be maintained while he was in position then the scheme was unworkable, since any supply route from El Arish could not be kept open, while the security of Aqaba as a supply-base could not be guaranteed either, even if the Arabs proved capable of capturing it in the first place. Any move north by Feisal, consequently, would be 'in the nature of a gamble' and Clayton felt it best for the Prince to wait until his position was more secure.¹⁵⁵ It was now suggested that Feisal's base for operations against eastern Syria should be Tadmur, a position that could be supplied by British forces in Mesopotamia.¹⁵⁶ Supplies could be sent to Tadmur in advance of Feisal's arrival so that operations could then commence immediately, while the presence of one of Hussein's sons might encourage some of the Mesopotamian tribes in the vicinity to adopt a more openly hostile attitude to the Turks.¹⁵⁷

This attempt to use the British position in Mesopotamia in order to assist the activities of Emir Feisal reflected a policy towards the Arabian people by the military in Egypt that was remarkably broad in its conceptions. Moreover, when it came to stimulating Arabian unrest the British engaged in a level of co-operation between their forces in Palestine and Mesopotamia that was significantly superior to that of almost any other sphere of

¹⁵⁴ Proposed operations in Syria by Col. Wilson 17 June 1916, FO 882/16.

¹⁵⁵ Clayton to High Commissioner 30 May 1917, FO 882/6.

¹⁵⁶ Proposed operations in Syria by Wilson 21 June 1917, FO 882/16.

¹⁵⁷ Note on Turkish forces in Hejaz 26 June 1917, FO 882/6.

operations. At the conference of 12 May 1917 a point had been made of the need for greater co-operation between Egypt and Mesopotamia, while an officer from General Maude's forces - Colonel Leachman - was actually present at the meeting. In one sense close co-operation was inevitable, for the British had contacts with tribes whose boundaries were by no means fixed and who were sometimes mutually hostile. If Murray or Maude wanted an Arab operation their Arab experts might first have to settle existing territorial disputes between tribes. Precisely this happened on 12 May 1917, for Leachman feared that the Sherif might instigate Nuri Shalaan to seize Hail and so antagonize Ibn Saud, thus dividing Britain's two most powerful tribal allies, Hussein and Ibn Saud.¹⁵⁸

Another reason for the surprisingly close co-operation between the EEF and Maude was a matter of geography. In some cases it was simply easier to contact the tribes to the east of Syria from Mesopotamia, especially as the British continued to advance up the Tigris and Euphrates and drew ever closer to northern Syria. The fall of Baghdad and Felujah opened up the eastern routes to Palestine and so represented, potentially, a source of threat to the Turkish left flank in Syria. For the British Nuri Shalaan's importance grew, therefore, for his tribe covered this area and was considered of some significance: 'These Arabs are amongst the best Bedouins there are; all they want are arms, ammunition, and money, to be really useful.'¹⁵⁹ It was quite conceivable, therefore, that a camel force of British troops operating from the Euphrates line might co-operate with these tribesmen - strengthened by European

¹⁵⁸ Note of a meeting at the Residency, op.cit.

¹⁵⁹ 'Palestine: geographical and political' by Ormsby-Gore.
1 Apr. 1917, CAB 21/15.

equipment - in 'well timed' attacks upon the Hama to Maan region.¹⁶⁰

Of particular importance in this whole issue was the contrast between the attitudes of the two General Staffs towards Arab operations and their relative successes or otherwise. The EEF had helped to foster the Arab revolt, which was containing an entire Turkish army and looked as if it might now finally start to 'spill over' into Syria. Maude and his officers, on the other hand, had experienced no real success whatsoever in their contacts with Arabs. Mark Sykes was concerned by this apparent discrepancy in the relative successes of the two commands; he felt Maude was 'unaware of scope of Arab movement' and should be urged on in this area by London.¹⁶¹ What actually took place next was carefully monitored by the India Office: 'Quite recently the War Office, acting on a hint from Sir Mark Sykes, have telegraphed to Sir Stanley Maude urging the importance of getting into close relations with the outlying tribes.'¹⁶² Maude therefore received a telegram direct from the CIGS on the subject.

Robertson's actual telegram was remarkable, for it reflected the successes of the EEF: he told Maude that the Arab movement 'has been of distinct military advantage in the past', but might cease to be so in the future if he 'marked time' in his contacts with the various tribes. Maude was instructed, therefore, to outline 'proposed action' to enlist the sympathies of the Arabs north of and adjacent to the Euphrates, and to extend 'the scope

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Wingate to F.O. 12 May 1917, L/P&S/11/119/735.

¹⁶² Note by J.E.S. 18 May 1917, L/P&S/11/123/2046.

of the whole movement.¹⁶³

Maude's reply was none too enthusiastic; he was not sure exactly what was expected of him and wanted the CIGS to clarify the matter.¹⁶⁴ Behind Maude's questions lay concern that if he propelled the Arabs into action not only ^{would} the Turks suffer, but the whole country, which he had desperately been trying to pacify, might erupt!¹⁶⁵ No doubt much to Maude's chagrin, Robertson's next telegram remained uncompromising in its demands; in fact, the CIGS made his views clearer and the influence of the EEF's experience more obvious:

The Arabs of the Hejaz assisted by us... are engaged in raiding with success the Turkish communications via the Hejaz railway and it has been represented that the Arabs might... be induced to take similar action along the Euphrates thus hampering the operations of the Turks in Mesopotamia. 166

Finally, as June was drawing to a close, Maude telegraphed his proposals and thoughts on the subject to the CIGS. Maude's plans largely depended upon the Arab chief, Fahad Bag Ibn Hadhdhad, whose influence extended between Baghdad and Damascus; with his help, Maude's officers could contact Nuri Shalaan and initiate attacks on the Palestine railway above Hama.¹⁶⁷ As this line of action would not be started until the autumn, it was too late for Murray. On the other hand, its timing was almost perfect for the EEF's new commander, as Robertson himself explained to Maude: 'I

163 CIGS to GOC in Force D 16 May 1917, L/P&S/11/123/2046.

164 Maude to CIGS 1 June 1917, L/P&S/11/123/2046.

165 Maude to Robertson 24 May 1917, FO 371/3056/136945.

166 CIGS to Gen. Maude 5 June 1917, L/P&S/11/123/2046.

167 GOC Force D to CIGS 24 June 1917, L/P&S/11/123/2046.

have little doubt that this will be welcomed in Egypt. Allenby is now on his way to relieve Murray and I will communicate with him... as soon as he has had time to consider situation.'¹⁶⁸ It was all coming together at just the right time for Allenby as a result of what had been achieved under Murray!

No action until autumn from Mesopotamia meant that Feisal's ambitious plan appeared to have been scuppered for the present. The general Arab offensive on the Hejaz railway never materialized and Feisal did not establish himself at Tadmur or any other position to the east of northern Syria, but a party of Feisal's men under the leadership of T. E. Lawrence and Chief Auda had been active north of the Hejaz. Even as Allenby was replacing Murray this force blew up a 'high bridge near Maan', while the Turkish commander there was reported to have asked for reinforcements since he feared a general revolt by the Arabs in the area and his communications with Aqaba had been severed.¹⁶⁹ Aqaba was about to be taken by an Arab force, so that General Allenby would be able to enjoy what Murray never had - tangible and direct contact between the EEF and the Sherif's forces. Writing about T. E. Lawrence's most famous exploit, the seizing of Aqaba in July 1917, Murray drew upon all his experience with Arab forces throughout 1916 and 1917 to explain this achievement:

It is difficult to gauge to what extent the Arabs can, or will, carry out what they plan or promise. What seems easy and reasonable never comes off whilst the 100 to 1 chance succeeds. ¹⁷⁰

168 CIGS to GOC Force D 26 June 1917, L/P&S/11/123/2046.

169 W.D. Intelligence Section EEF 28 and 29 June 1917, WO 157/716.

170 Murray to Curzon 11 Aug. 1917, Eur MSS F 112/536.

General Allenby, like his predecessor, would soon learn the truth of these words.

CHAPTER 16CONCLUSION

'Well, let them send out who they will he will get on no quicker - there can be no fireworks in this campaign.'

General Murray 13 June 1917

In a sense this has been the story of two generals, Maxwell and Murray. The experiences of both men were remarkably similar. Both were sent to Egypt to take control of the country at an important time when concern for its security in London was considerable. Both did a good job in clearing up a confusing situation in Egypt on their arrival when it would not be an exaggeration to say that chaos reigned in the country. Both men fought a battle in which they did not gain the sort of success hoped for and which ultimately made their position in Egypt insecure. Indeed, neither man ever regained the prestige they had enjoyed earlier in their careers once they were removed from Cairo. Both generals never had the number of troops they asked for and consequently found themselves overreached because of the numerous different demands of their commands. What is more, neither of them ever sorted out entirely satisfactorily how to govern Egypt and to conduct operations successfully in the Sinai at the same time - although Murray came as close as it was possible to come to this, given his meagre resources through the formation of Eastern Force and Desert Column and the appointments of Generals Dobell and Chetwode. Finally, both men left Egypt disillusioned by the way in which they had been treated and embittered towards those whom they considered responsible. Maxwell, somewhat ironically, blamed Murray, and his letters after March 1916

reveal a continued hostility for his successor. Murray, on the other hand, saw Lloyd George and the Government as the real culprits behind his dismissal.

Of course, since General Allenby succeeded so dramatically after July 1917 it has often been argued that this merely reveals the inabilities of both Maxwell and Murray to come to terms with their commands. But this will not do. For one thing, Allenby was given the troops that neither Maxwell nor Murray ever had and the full support of the War Cabinet to launch a major offensive that had already been planned while Murray was still in Egypt. Moreover, the new C in C's ideas and plans did not differ drastically from those of his predecessor, as Lynden-Bell explained early in July 1917: 'As regards the general situation I do not think you will find the present Chief's views any different from those of Sir Archibald's.'¹ Interestingly enough even Allenby's much vaunted move of the EEF's GHQ from Cairo into Palestine may not have been as sensible as is usually imagined, for it undoubtedly led to a degree of isolation between himself and Egypt which would become one of the causes behind internal trouble in that country after the war.²

Rather than ascribing the failures of Maxwell and Murray solely to their own mistakes and weaknesses, therefore, a far more balanced approach would seem necessary, taking account of what can only be described as a failure in British strategy in the region up to June 1917. That the Government realized it had made mistakes can easily be proven. After his return to London Sir Archibald presented for

¹ Lynden-Bell to Gen. Maurice 3 July 1917, WO 106/718.

² Elgood, p.

publication his final despatch from Egypt dated 28 June 1917, in the opening lines of which he made the following accusation: 'I think it necessary to point out that the policy of the War Cabinet ... underwent several changes between the end of 1916 and April 1917.'³ This accusation clearly nettled the Government, for at the meeting of the War Cabinet on 17 August 1917 a discussion on the subject of this despatch was held and it was 'pointed out that the first paragraph of the Report gave a somewhat misleading impression of vacillation in the War Cabinet's policy.' Although the point was also made that some of the information contained in the despatch could be of use to the enemy, there could be little doubt that it was the charge of vacillation which had angered the politicians and led to a decision that the despatch could not possibly be published without 'drastic revision.'⁴ The CIGS initially supported this ban upon the publishing of this despatch because he believed it could aid the Turks if it were released before Allenby had launched his offensive; this meant he had to write to the editor of the Times explaining the decision, since there had been a considerable amount of speculation on the subject in the press.⁵ A 'very much cut down' version of the despatch appeared in the London Gazette on 20 November 1917, but this did not please Sir Archibald.⁶ Meanwhile, he had begun to win the sympathy of the men at the War Office as the underlying reason for the withholding of his despatch was becoming clearer. For example, on 31 December 1919 Henry Wilson, then the CIGS, made the following comment on the subject: 'There is nothing

³ Murray Despatches. Fourth Despatch. 28 June 1917, p.129.

⁴ War Cabinet meeting 17 Aug. 1917, CAB 23/2.

⁵ Robertson to Dawson 12 Oct. 1917, Robertson papers I/36/25.

⁶ Notes on Four Despatches from Egypt 1916-1917, Murray papers 79/48/3.

in all this to which we soldiers can object.'⁷ Still more revealing was the contents of a note to the CIGS early in 1920: 'The objections to publication are political rather than military.'⁸ A special conference on the subject actually had to be held at 10 Downing Street in February, and even then there was concern that if permission were granted for publication General Murray might still accuse the Government of 'deliberate suppression of unpalatable facts.'⁹ Moreover, Lloyd George still wished for certain constraints to be placed upon Sir Archibald if permission were given:

The Prime Minister thinks that the best plan would be to point out to General Murray that the various changes of policy on which he lays stress... were based not merely on the local considerations connected with the campaign... but on a general review of the course of the war as a whole. 10

This letter actually formed the text of a note that the War Office demanded be placed at the head of the despatch when it was finally published in 1920. In the meantime Sir Archibald had received the evidence of vindication for his belief that he had been badly treated in 1917, since he was promoted to full general on 6 September 1918. Moreover, in Allenby's final despatch dated 28 June 1919 he mentioned, after two years of silence, Murray's 'brilliant Sinai campaign' which enabled him to reap 'the fruits of his foresight and strategical imagination.'¹¹

These events have been covered in some detail in order to demonstrate just how sensitive the Government was, even in 1920,

7 Note by Henry Wilson 31 December 1919, WO 32/5134.

8 Note to CIGS by H. Creedy 2 Jan. 1920, WO 32/5134.

9 Extract from Draft Conclusion of a Conference held at 10 Downing Street 3 Feb. 1920, WO 32/5134.

10 Hankey to Churchill 23 Feb. 1920, WO 32/5134.

11 Despatch by Allenby 28 June 1919 quoted in Murray Despatches, p.vii.

about accusations as to its vacillation in strategic matters in 1916 and 1917. There can be little doubt, therefore, that British military policy in Egypt and Palestine from 1914 until June 1917 was formulated during a failure in strategy at the highest level in London at the end of 1916 and during the first four months of 1917.

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